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WHY FACEBOOK IS FRIENDING THE BJP

THE RUSH FOR GREEN CLEARANCES

MS DHONI: THE QUIET LONG WALK

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AUGUST 31, 2020 ₹75

# INDIA TODAY

SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT
1986–2020

# SUICIDE OR MURDER?

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEATH OF SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT THAT REFUSE TO DIE DOWN. AN INVESTIGATION

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SCAN HERE TO APPLY

FROM THE

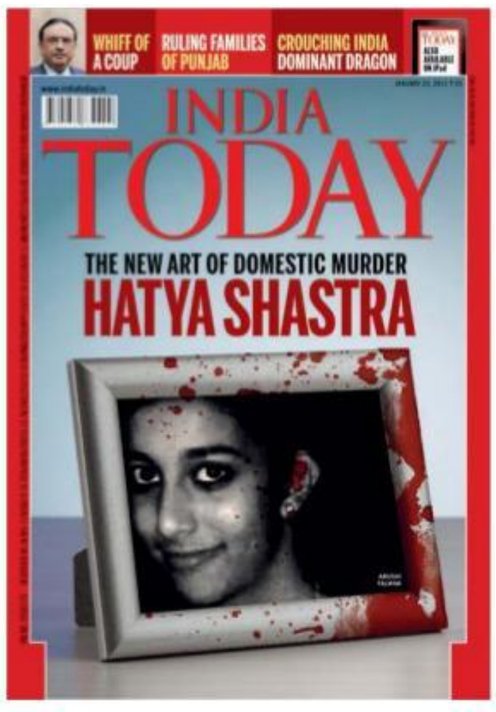
# EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

When the makers of a biopic on Indian cricket captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni wanted a Bollywood star to play the titular role, they didn't have to look beyond Sushant Singh Rajput. Not only were the actor and the cricketer born and raised in the same state, but their careers were also mirror images of each other. Both were rank outsiders who had broken into their fiercely competitive professions by dint of sheer talent. Inspirational stories of self-made stars are the stuff of cinematic dreams. Yet, not even the finest scriptwriter could have imagined the drama around Sushant Singh Rajput's tragic death on June 14. The actor's demise, given his age, success and potential, has evoked collective shock across the nation. The disbelief and curiosity have been on an unprecedented level. That it happened amid a pandemic and the lockdown meant that his fans held a vigil for him on social media through hashtags, shared speculative investigative and forensic theories on WhatsApp and YouTube. Unfortunately, the whole investigation seems to be driven by news channels and social media rather than the police.

Sushant's suicide has entered the pantheon of shockingly untimely celebrity deaths such as those of Divya Bharti and Sridevi. Emotions supersede facts or the lack thereof, and alternative theories abound. Sushant's death by suicide, as determined by his postmortem and viscera reports, has become a tantalising film with many twists and turns and characters of various kinds coming out of the woodwork of his life. A tragedy rapidly descended into an exaggerated drama about a closed circle of interest groups within the industry. Labelled the 'movie mafia', they were accused of denying talented outsiders their due. This narrative played out for 40 days, during which time the Mumbai police summoned celebrity Bollywood directors and other film industry bigwigs for questioning. Anyone who had a grievance about how Bollywood works jumped into the fray. On news channels or to anybody who cared to listen, they poured out their angst, claiming it was a rigged system that drove Sushant to suicide.

However, all this was forgotten when almost six weeks after his death, Sushant's family accused his girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty, her family and two others of abetting his suicide. The Mumbai police, famed for their sleuthing skills, seem to have been shockingly lax in their investigation of the star's death. They failed to explain several alleged inconsistencies or even to file an FIR in the case. Many of the conspiracy theories could have been squelched initially had the police been more diligent. The actor's family filed a complaint in Patna because they had no faith in the Mumbai police's investigation. The Bihar police took cognisance of the complaint, filed an FIR and followed it up with an investigation. As part of the process, they turned up in Mumbai, triggering the political battle between the two states and their police machinery. The Enforcement Directorate has also joined the investigations because of the accusations of money-laundering.

In India, if there is any controversy worth taking advantage of, politics can never be far behind. The Bihar elections are barely two months away, and Sushant's death has become cause celebre for politicians to exploit in the name of seeking justice for him. The politicians of Bihar are incredibly forthcoming in making statements about the case but maintain a studied silence when it comes to the floods or the pandemic in their state. The Maharashtra government is a non-NDA one, and the Supreme Court's recent decision to uphold the transfer of the case to the CBI has left it red-faced.



Our January 23, 2012 cover

That this is now a Supreme Court-monitored CBI investigation has propelled Sushant's suicide into the league of other sensational cases—the 1999 shooting of model Jessica Lall and the 2008 murder of Aarushi Talwar, one solved, the other unsolved. In both cases, a collective nationwide desire for justice was the common thread. Yet, what explains the grip of the Sushant suicide saga on our national consciousness amid a raging Covid-19 pandemic, a grim economic downturn and an aggressive troop mobilisation by the Chinese on our northern borders? Subliminally, the story is perhaps a reflection of our obsession with actors and their celebrity lifestyles. It is as much about the realisation that celebrities can sometimes be as fragile and vulnerable as any of us.

Our cover story, 'Suicide or Murder?', written by Senior Associate Editors Suhani Singh, Kiran D. Tare and Amitabh Srivastava, examines the twists and turns in this sensational death of a star and the many questions it has raised. Claims and counterclaims, facts and myths, subplots and conspiracy theories proliferate. We endeavour to clear this fog of confusion as much as we can.

Meanwhile, we wait for the CBI to find the truth as and when they do. Hopefully, it will be soon so that the speculation can stop.

*(Aroon Purie)*

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**COVER STORY**
**SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT**

## THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT

Did the Bollywood star commit suicide or was he a victim of foul play? An investigation into the key questions that refuse to die down

*Photograph by* BANDEEP SINGH

*Cover by* **NILANJAN DAS**

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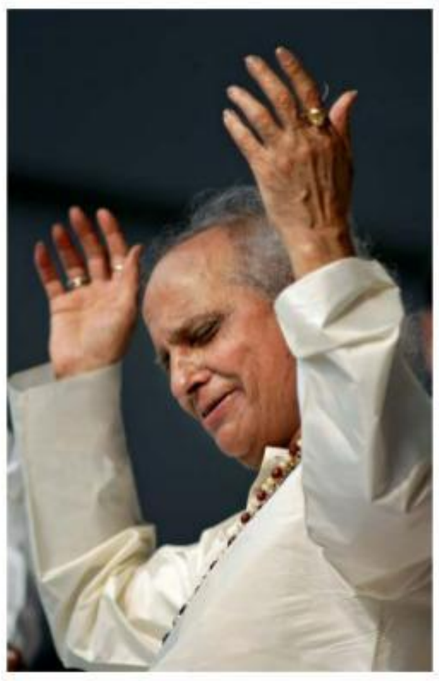

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M.S. DHONI

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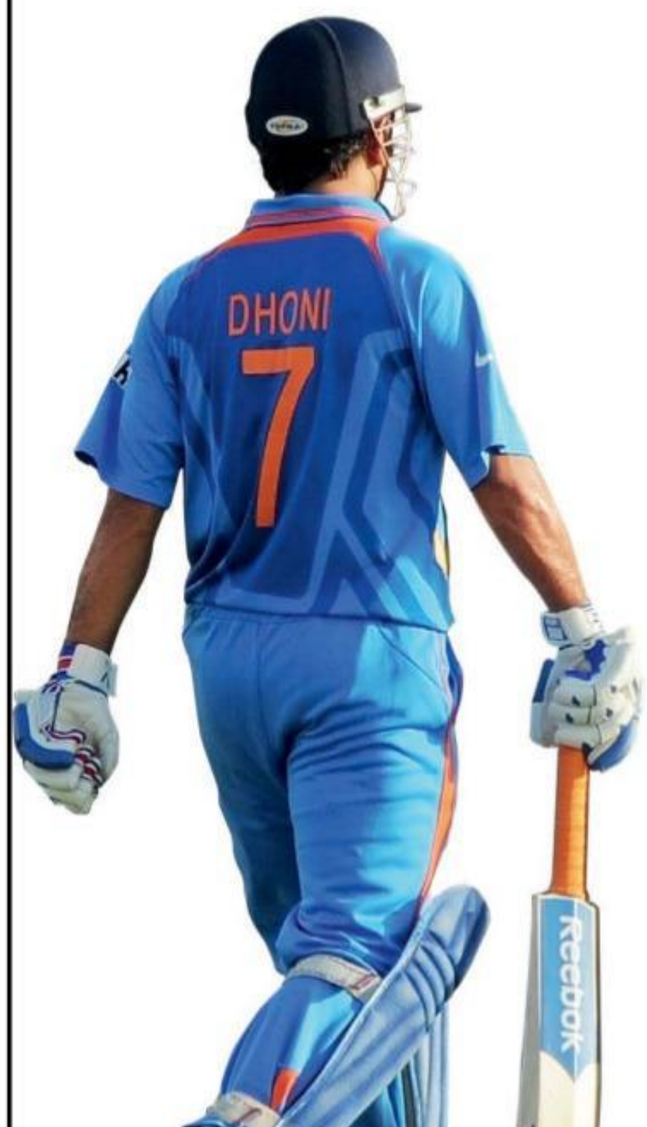


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### NITISH VINDICATED AS CBI TAKES OVER SUSHANT CASE *by Amitabh Srivastava*

After the Supreme Court approves a CBI probe into the Bollywood actor's death, the Bihar chief minister says there will be justice
https://bit.ly/2YhBwr0

### Why Rhea left Sushant's house before he died, her lawyer reveals *by Kiran D. Tare*

An exclusive interview with Rhea Chakraborty's lawyer Satish Maneshinde
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### UP braces for a fresh round of statue politics *by Ashish Misra*

Political parties unveil plans for statues of community icons with an eye on the 2022 election. Will it pay off?
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### Would have apologised if I had called someone 'nikamma': Sachin Pilot *by Kaushik Deka*

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आज तक

# देश का नं. 1
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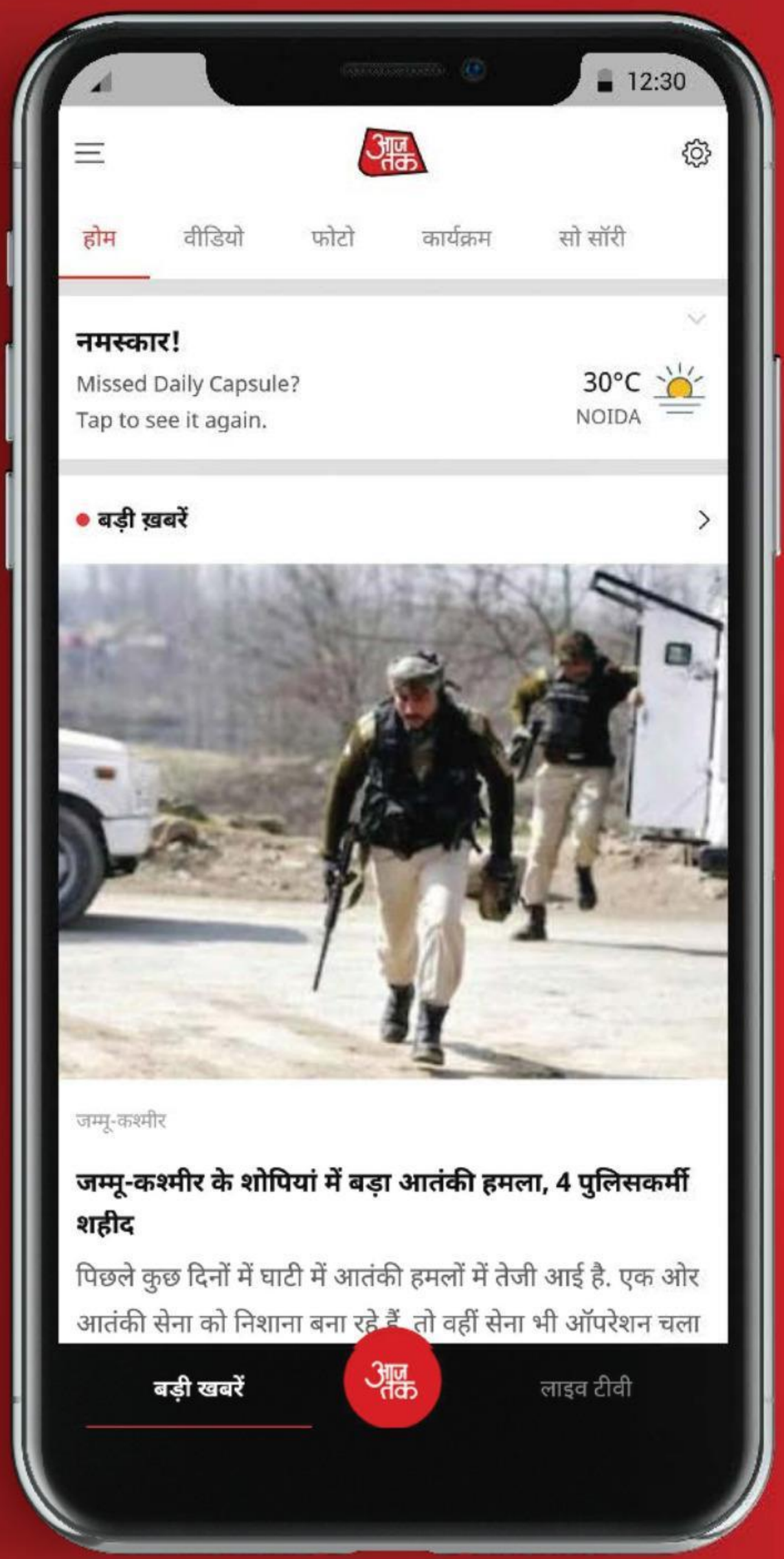

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**MEET & GREET**
PM Narendra Modi and Mark Zuckerberg at a Townhall meeting at Facebook's headquarters in California in 2015

FACEBOOK

# FRIENDING THE POWERS THAT BE

**By Kaushik Deka**

A political slugfest has erupted between the BJP government and Opposition parties over an article in the *Wall Street Journal* that alleged that the social media giant was favouring the ruling party. According to the *WSJ* story, some Facebook employees had flagged certain posts in March by T. Raja Singh, BJP MP from Telangana, as dangerous violations of the company's hate-speech rules. But Ankhi Das, the firm's public policy director for India, south and central Asia, opposed applying the "hate speech rules to Singh" and "three other Hindu nationalist individuals and groups...flagged internally for promoting or participating in violence". Das, the article said, told employees that punishing violations by BJP politicians would damage the company's business prospects in India. Andy Stone, a Facebook spokesperson, admitted that Das had raised concerns about the political fallout, but added that her opposition wasn't the sole factor that determined the company's decision to not take any action.

The *WSJ* article has triggered a massive debate, with the Congress demanding a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) probe into the allegations of misconduct by Facebook. "The

BJP and RSS control Facebook and WhatsApp in India," says Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. "They spread fake news and hatred through it and use it to influence the electorate. We cannot allow any manipulation of our hard-earned democracy through bias, fake news and hate speech. Facebook's involvement...needs to be questioned by all Indians." Shashi Tharoor, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on information technology (IT), has said that the committee would like to hear an explanation from Facebook. Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinate has even hinted at Das's direct connection to the BJP as a factor influencing Facebook's tilt towards the saffron party. "Her identical twin sister Rashmi Das was not just a general secretary of the RSS-affiliated ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) students' union at JNU, she continues to be an ABVP activist," Shrinate said. Rashmi is also a former chairperson of the World Organisation of Students and Youth (WOSY), a non-profit affiliated with ABVP.

The BJP wasted no time in returning fire. Union parliamentary affairs minister Pralhad Joshi ruled out a JPC probe, while BJP MP and member of the standing committee on IT Nishikant Dubey questioned the legality of Tharoor's plan to summon Facebook. Union IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad mocked the Congress for having the "gall to question the BJP", saying that it was "caught red-handed in alliance with Cambridge Analytica and Facebook to weaponise data before elections". In 2018, Christopher Wylie, a former employee of British data analytics and political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, which allegedly stole the data of 50 million Facebook users in 2014, claimed that the Congress was the firm's client in India.

When contacted, Facebook said: "We prohibit hate speech and content that incites violence and we enforce these policies globally without regard to anyone's political position or party affiliation. While we know there is more to do, we're making progress on enforcement and conduct regular audits of our process to ensure fairness and accuracy." They had released this statement publicly on August 17, but have otherwise maintained a studied silence. There has been no independent audit on the platform's actions against incendiary content.

This is not the first time Facebook has faced allegations of misconduct. It has often aligned itself with the ruling dispensation across the globe. For instance, in Singapore, it agreed to append a "correction notice" to news stories deemed false by the government. Earlier this month, in the US, Facebook's vice-president of global public policy, Joel Kaplan was reported to have intervened to "remove strikes" against conservative pages in the US. The social media platform has been accused in Brazil of similar interference. Last year, TMC MP Derek O'Brien had claimed in Parliament that Facebook's algorithm was censoring anti-BJP news and said that "Facebook's Delhi office is virtually an extended BJP IT cell".

**A 'WORKING RELATIONSHIP' WITH THE CASH-RICH BJP HAS ENSURED A STEADY FLOW OF AD REVENUE FOR FACEBOOK**

The decision by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to tie up with Facebook India for a voter awareness campaign in 2017 has also come under scrutiny. A year later, on March 23, the ECI announced that they were reviewing its deal with Facebook due to concerns of data breach, which could affect free and fair elections. However, four days later, the partnership was back on. No explanation was offered.

Facebook's alignment with the ruling political forces, however, seems driven more by commercial considerations than ideological ones. The growing spend by political parties on social media ads is making these bonds more transactional. For instance, in the 2019-20 election cycle in the US, Facebook cornered 59.4 per cent of the total digital political ad revenues, says market research company eMarketer. Now, India has emerged as the go-to destination for political ad revenue.

With more than 340 million registered users and 400 million using its chat service WhatsApp, India is Facebook's biggest market. Plus, the digital landscape of India is only getting bigger—the internet population of the country grew 108 per cent, from 250 million in 2014, when the BJP came to power, to 520 million in 2019. Social media usage grew by 155 per cent during this period. Facebook, in April, announced that it was spending $5.7 billion (around Rs 43,000 crore)—its biggest foreign investment yet—to buy a less than 10 per cent stake in Indian telecommunications company Reliance Jio, which has 388 million subscribers.

A "working relationship" with the cash-rich BJP has ensured a steady flow of ad revenue for Facebook to further its growth plan. According to Facebook's Ad Library Report, over 40 per cent of the Rs 10 crore spent on political ads in February and March, prior to the 2019 general election, came from the BJP.

While the BJP has emerged as its top client, the patronage is not quite explicit yet. For instance, in 2016, Facebook's proposal to launch 'Free Basics' to provide a free, Facebook-centric internet service was ultimately rejected by the government, albeit after a big hue and cry from net-neutrality activists. The company's plan to launch WhatsApp digital payment service, too, has been pending for over two years. ■

DAVID PAUL MORRIS/GETTY IMAGES

*Illustration by* SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

# MAMATA'S MUSICAL

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his Independence Day speech at the Red Fort, West Bengal chief minister **Mamata Banerjee** held her annual celebration at Kolkata's Red Road later in the day. She played a bunch of new songs she had penned to mark 74 years of a free India. With lyrics like '*Amra Bharatmatar santan/ Amader modhye nei bibhajan* (we the children of Mother India are indivisible)', the songs extolled the virtues of secularism and unity in diversity. There was also tableaux at the event, promoting government programmes on safe driving, judicious use of water and the fight against coronavirus, playing another one of Mamata's creations, '*Corona thamay jabe*'. She truly has a song for all reasons and seasons.

ANI

## Best Foot Forward

Being a former CM (of Uttarakhand) and an RSS veteran seem to have helped Maharashtra governor **Bhagat Singh Koshyari** build his social capital. His charm offensive in the state continues even after a year in office. In March, he addressed the state legislature in flawless Marathi. In July, he chose to visit the state-run Sir J.J. Hospital over private hospitals for a routine health check-up. On August 16, he declined to use a state helicopter to visit Shivneri Fort, Chhatrapati Shivaji's birthplace, making the trek on foot instead. Quite the common man.

## On the Move Again

When **Satya Pal Malik** landed in Goa as governor last October, he had hoped for a breather after his turbulent stint in Jammu & Kashmir. Alas, it was not to be. His public disagreements with CM Pramod Sawant—over the latter's handling of the pandemic and the proposal for a new Raj Bhavan—are being seen as the reason behind his sudden transfer to Meghalaya. Considering his propensity to upset the Centre, Malik's fourth gubernatorial stint in three years might not last long either. Watch this space.

## THE DANCE OF DISSENT

The ongoing crisis within the Congress and the scare in Rajasthan mean the party is loath to discipline rebels. In Punjab, it watched silently as two prominent leaders in the state openly criticised Amarinder Singh's government and even petitioned the governor for a CBI inquiry into a recent hooch tragedy. In Uttar Pradesh, the party is not sure how to handle dissident MLA **Aditi Singh** from Raebareli. She was suspended as general secretary of the Congress's women's wing in May for criticising the quality of buses sent by the party to transport migrants. On August 10, she sought help from CM Yogi Adityanath, whom she called her "political guru", to halt some demolitions in her constituency. Singh clearly has a plan B.

ANI

***–Sandeep Unnithan with Romita Datta, Kiran D. Tare, Ashish Misra and Anilesh S. Mahajan***

**IS THERE A PROBLEM?** A ward at the Kannauj district hospital trauma centre, which has been converted into barracks for UP police personnel

*Photographs by* **MANEESH AGNIHOTRI**

UTTAR PRADESH

# STRICKEN BY APATHY

**By Ashish Misra**

Four years ago, the district hospital at Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh added a trauma centre at the cost of Rs 15 crore. The new facility battled operational hiccups and a shortage of doctors from day one and could never serve its purpose. Now, it's fully functional—as a police outpost.

The patient examination room at the centre's entrance is the office of Pratap Singh Lodhi, the outpost in-charge. The wards have been turned into living quarters for policemen; the post-operation ward has become a dump yard. The ramp leading to the first floor is being used to park police motorcycles. Beds and medical equipment lie locked in the X-ray room. The apathy is glaring and so is the waste of public money.

Kannauj MP Subrata Pathak, of the BJP, and Anil Dohre, the Samajwadi Party (SP) MLA from Kannauj Sadar, blame each other for the failure to appoint medical staff at the trauma centre. Krishna Swaroop, the chief medical officer (CMO) of Kannauj, offers hope, but no timeline. "There has been correspondence with the state government. Staff will be deployed and the trauma centre will become operational soon," says Swaroop.

Defunct hospitals dot several districts of UP. Of the total 165 district hospitals, six with 100 or more beds are closed. In over 50 hospitals, one or more specialised facilities are not operational due to shortage of staff. It's an alarming reality to contend with when the state is battling a rising number of Covid cases.

According to the health department, as of August 18, UP had reported 50,242 active Covid cases and 2,585

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Cancer Hospital
EMERGENCY

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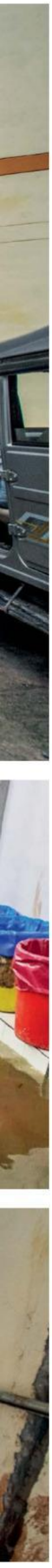


**IN NEED OF INTENSIVE CARE**

1. Idle ambulances at the non-operational trauma centre at the Kannauj district hospital
2. The closed cancer hospital in Kannauj
3. A waterlogged ward of the district hospital in Mahoba
4. The X-ray room at the Kannauj trauma centre, where medical equipment lies locked up
5. Handrails along a ramp at the Kannauj trauma centre serve as a clothesline for police personnel who have made the hospital their living quarters

**165**
**District hospitals in Uttar Pradesh**

**6**
**District hospitals with 100 or more beds are shut. In over 50 hospitals, one or more specialised facilities are not operational due to staff shortages**

**₹15**
**CRORE**
**Project cost of the trauma centre at the Kannauj district hospital, which has been repurposed as a police outpost**

deaths, including two cabinet ministers of the Yogi Adityanath government. The total cases numbered 109,607 as of August 18.

In such a situation, every additional hospital could have made a difference, if only the state's successive governments had completed projects on time and made them operational. A 220-bed cancer hospital set up in 2016 at the Government Medical College in Kannauj remains shut as staff has not been appointed. OPD (out-patient department) services were discontinued in the first year itself and radiotherapy facilities did not take off even though approvals were secured in 2018. A 130-bed cardiology wing that came up the same year is also closed. Navneet Kumar, principal of the medical college, has written to the state administration, requesting urgent recruitment of staff.

Eight years into construction, a four-storey ancillary facility that would have added 200 beds to the 100-bed district hospital in Banda is far from complete. Started by the SP government in 2012, the project cost has shot up by 30 per cent, from Rs 56 crore to Rs 74 crore. Banda divisional commissioner Gaurav Dayal has written to the state government, seeking the additional funds. If and when the funds come in, it will take at least another nine months for the new facility to be completed.

"Most governments focus only on the construction of hospital buildings, not on appointing medical staff. As a result, brand new hospitals become white elephants," says Ramesh Chandra Gupta, a former government engineer involved in the construction of hospitals in the state.

In Kumarganj near Ayodhya, a 100-bed hospital project, initially estimated to cost Rs 9 crore, got completed two years behind schedule, in 2012. The cost overrun was to the tune of Rs 11 crore. The hospital is facing an acute shortage of staff, with only one doctor manning the OPD against the sanctioned strength of 25. Similarly, the carpet city of Bhadohi has a 100-bed government hospital, but no doctors for the past two years. It is not operational.

UP has 853 community health centres, 4,300 primary health centres and 21,000 health sub-centres. The crumbling health infrastructure is reflecting in the management of Covid. On August 11, chief secretary Rajendra Kumar Tiwari was at the Covid command centre in Kanpur and handled a complaint. The caller said her husband was critical at Kanpur's Kanshiram Hospital but the hospital authorities were ignoring her plea to shift him to Hallett Hospital in the same city. Tiwari ordered the removal of the chief medical superintendent of Kanshiram Hospital. On August 9, the same hospital witnessed great commotion following the death of four Covid patients.

Reports of negligence in the treatment of Covid patients have also come in from Agra, Mathura, Bulandshahr, Lucknow, Aligarh and Varanasi districts. The administration says action has been taken against all errant health officials.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had, on June 20, ordered that doctors be relieved of administrative work and made available to fight Covid. However, at the office of the Directorate of Medical and Health Services in Lucknow, over 60 doctors remain assigned to clerical jobs. In the Lucknow CMO's office, two ophthalmologists are on administrative duty as deputy CMOs, while a cancer specialist and an ophthalmologist are working as additional CMOs.

"Inter-departmental coordination for Covid management has gone haywire in UP after the lifting of lockdown restrictions," says Ramesh Kumar, former additional director in the state health department. "Officials are out to humiliate each other. In many districts, tussles are on between district magistrates and health officials. All of this has undermined the efforts to tackle Covid-19."

D.S. Negi, director general medical and health, says he has asked for a status report on unutilised hospital buildings from all districts. "These hospitals will be started on priority. They could even be converted into Covid quarantine centres as per the need," he says. To hire doctors quickly, walk-in interviews are being held. "We are also planning to shift doctors from districts with fewer Covid cases to those with a high number of Covid patients." ■

MADHYA PRADESH

# The Curious Clout of Ram Bai

By Rahul Noronha

She is from the badlands of Bundelkhand in Madhya Pradesh. Her family allegedly controls not only lucrative businesses but also official transfers and postings in the state. Government privileges are a given for her irrespective of the party in power. Meet Patharia MLA Ram Bai, whose unfettered clout in the previous Kamal Nath-led Congress government continues under the new BJP dispensation. What makes this Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader so crucial to any ruling formation in the state and why does every government give her the long rope?

One of the reasons for Ram Bai's influence is the way numbers are stacked up in the 230-member Madhya Pradesh assembly. In the 2018 assembly election, the Congress, with 114 MLAs, emerged as the single-largest party and formed the government with the support of 'Others'—one MLA of the Samajwadi Party (SP), four Independents and the two BSP legislators, including Ram Bai.

Her support critical to the survival of the Nath government, Ram Bai, 40, soon began asserting herself. Videos surfaced of the lawmaker purportedly threatening officials with dire consequences if her 'demands' were not met. The Nath government allotted her a 'B' type bungalow, usually meant for ministers and senior bureaucrats. But Ram Bai's real brush with infamy was yet to come.

On March 15, 2019, Devendra Chaurasia, a businessman and local politician from Hatta town in Damoh district, was murdered at his bitumen plant on the outskirts of Hatta. The Damoh zilla panchayat member had switched over from the BSP to the Congress three days before his death. Ram Bai's husband Govind, her brother-in-law Chandu, nephew Golu and cousin Lokesh were among the seven booked for the murder. Ram Bai terms it a political conspiracy against her.

As the investigation began, police dropped Govind's name from the chargesheet on the basis of mobile tower location data, which reportedly did not show his phone to be anywhere near the murder site. Two witnesses also gave statements that suggested Govind was elsewhere at the time of the murder. The accused family members of Ram Bai, who had gone absconding, later surrendered. Govind and Chandu have a long criminal record—some 50 cases altogether. They have been convicted in a triple murder case and sentenced to life terms. Both were out on bail at the time of Chaurasia's murder. Ram Bai too has cases against her, on charges of criminal intimidation, rioting, trespassing and voluntarily causing hurt.

The month before his murder, Chaurasia had brought a no-confidence motion against Shivcharan Patel, the Damoh zilla panchayat president. This was allegedly prompted by local politics involving a Union minister and a senior BJP leader from the area. Ram Bai, who was formerly vice-president of the panchayat, had supported Patel. The motion was defeated, but Chaurasia is thought to have earned the wrath of Ram Bai's family.

This March, the BJP took the reins of power from the Congress in Madhya Pradesh. With 107 MLAs of its own and 27 vacant seats in the assembly—due to desertions by 25 legislators from the Congress and the death of two other lawmakers—the BJP has a majority government. But this has not diminished Ram Bai's sway as she was among the MLAs who were part of the coup against the Nath government.

In early March, Ram Bai was flown to Delhi by BJP MLAs and put up at a hotel in Gurugram. Videos of then Congress ministers Jaivardhan Singh and Jitu Patwari getting her back to Bhopal had circulated on social media. Ram Bai had then denied supporting the BJP and said she had gone to meet her daughter in Delhi. When the Nath government eventually fell, she declared support for the BJP and claimed to have been promised a ministerial berth. While that did not materialise, Ram Bai voted for BJP candidates in the Rajya Sabha polls in June.

The BJP continues to humour Ram Bai even though it is comfortably placed in the state assembly. And here's why. Though the BJP has 107 seats and the Congress is continuously suffering attrition in its ranks, the saffron

**RAM BAI'S SUPPORT WOULD BE CRUCIAL FOR THE BJP TO REMAIN IN POWER IF IT WINS LESS THAN NINE OF THE 27 SEATS IN BYPOLLS**

PANKAJ TIWARI

party seems to have decided to proceed with caution till the by-elections to the 27 vacant assembly seats are over. The BJP needs to win at least nine of these seats to remain in power. The Congress, however, needs to win all 27 to return to power and form a government on its own.

There is a third possible scenario. In case the BJP wins less than nine seats and the Congress more than 18, either party will need the support of seven MLAs. This support will come from the ranks of the Independents, the BSP and the SP. In such a scenario, Ram Bai's support will again be crucial to keep either formation in power. In case the BJP wins more than nine seats and forms a government with a comfortable majority, Ram Bai's run of good luck may end.

The BSP lawmaker recently faced some challenge from unexpected quarters when Siddharth Malaiya, a BJP leader from Damoh and also the son of former state finance minister Jayant Malaiya, spoke out against her in the Chaurasia murder case. He joined Chaurasia's son Somesh for a press conference and announced a bandh in Hatta, which was successful.

Then, in June, the Chaurasia murder case turned murkier. Kamal Ahirwar, a youth from the Scheduled Caste community, accused members of the Chaurasia clan of an attempt to

**IN DEMAND**
BSP legislator Ram Bai

waylay and murder him over an alleged property dispute between the two families. Four members of the deceased businessman's family were booked in the case. Interestingly, Ahirwar's mother Vidya Rani was one of the witnesses in the Chaurasia murder case. Her statement led the police to conclude that Ram Bai's husband was not at the site of Chaurasia's murder.

Perhaps in an indication of Ram Bai's continuing influence even after a change of government in the state, the Damoh police refused to investigate a potential link between the Ahirwar family and Govind. The police also detained two relatives of the Chaurasia family apparently to bring pressure on the others named in the Ahirwar case to surrender. They were later released. On August 13, the Chaurasia family's stand was vindicated when the Madhya Pradesh High Court restrained the Damoh police from taking any coercive action against them till the next hearing.

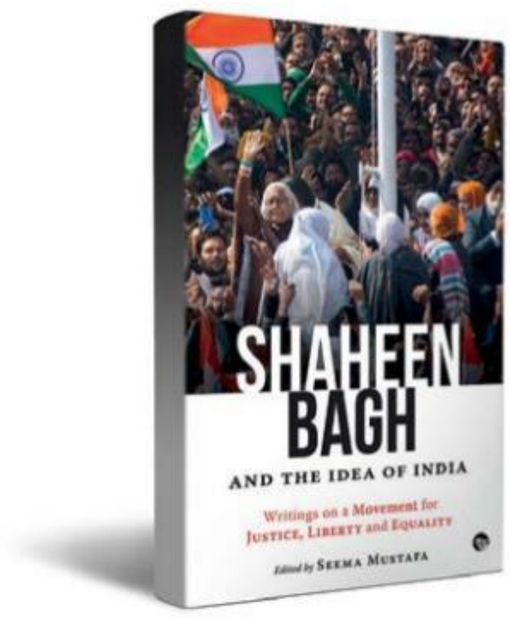
"The attempt to murder and SC/ST Atrocities Act cases against my family members are meant to pressure them to not pursue my father's murder case," alleges Chaurasia's son Somesh. "We have filed a case in the chief judicial magistrate's court in Damoh against the police discharging Ram Bai's husband Govind in the murder case. A ruling is awaited."

Ram Bai claims this is all part of a political witch-hunt. In her defence, she says: "The Devendra Chaurasia case is sub judice, so I would not like to comment on it. Chaurasia had been unwell for some time. The Chaurasia family has named close to 30 people in the case. But for someone to have been killed, no weapons have been found." She also targets Jayant Malaiya. "I am aware Jayant Malaiya is behind whatever is happening. But I believe in the court of God and know that justice will be done in the end," she says. ■

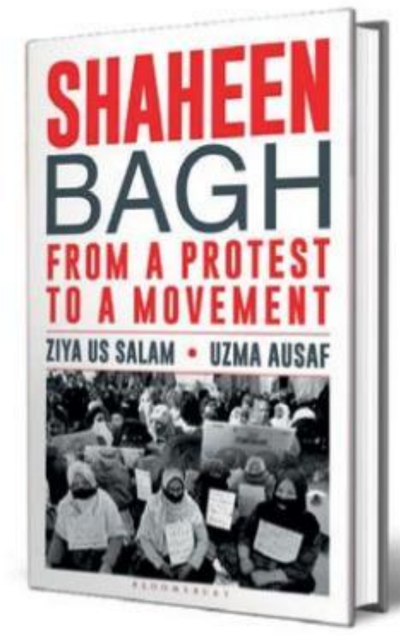
BOOKS

# THE SHAHEEN BAGH IDEAL

**Shougat Dasgupta**




**SHAHEEN BAGH AND THE IDEA OF INDIA**
**Writings on a Movement for Justice, Liberty and Equality**
*edited by Seema Mustafa*
SPEAKING TIGER
**₹450; 228 pages**




**SHAHEEN BAGH**
**From a Protest to a Movement**
*by Zia Us Aslam & Uzma Ausaf*
BLOOMSBURY
**₹599; 286 pages**

IN her introduction to *Shaheen Bagh and the Idea of India*, journalist Seema Mustafa, the editor of this anthology, notes that "unlikely revolutionaries—lower-middle-class Muslim women easily lost in a crowd—took the lead, laying claim to our democracy and its enduring symbols, and the rest of India followed". If only such an optimistic interpretation were true. Sadly, it appears as if the so-called silent majority—which has elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi twice by emphatic margins—has internalised the BJP narrative that the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh are, in the words of Seemi Pasha, author of several pieces in the anthology, at the vanguard of a "treasonous revolt by a belligerent and politically dispensable community".

Led by home minister Amit Shah and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath, the BJP ran a viscerally prejudiced campaign before the Delhi elections in February. Push the button marked 'lotus' so hard, Shah exhorted voters, that they feel the current in Shaheen Bagh and run. It backfired, not necessarily because voters disapproved of the language, but because Arvind Kejriwal had Delhi voters eating out of the palm of his hand and the BJP had no compelling chief ministerial alternative. The hideous coda to the old-fashioned secular nationalism on display in Shaheen Bagh were the riots in northeast Delhi resulting in at least 53, mostly Muslim, deaths. "One can-not now be sure," writes Pasha, "if [BJP politician, Kapil] Mishra's speech was the trigger or scene one, act one of a carefully planned drama of terror."

Ziya Us Salam and Uzma Ausaf in *Shaheen Bagh: From a Protest to a Movement* lionise the protesters as these "exemplary Shaheen Bagh women—steadfast, resolute, united and almost unbelievable peaceniks... With their incredible powers of patience and abiding belief in *ahimsa*". Rather than persuade us that these women "gave the nation hope", this reads like a eulogy. Both books show us in detail that Shaheen Bagh was extraordinary. That the bravery of those who were there cannot be gainsaid, which applies equally to all those college students who protested in the maw of the thugs seemingly permitted a free hand by police. But both books also offer immediacy rather than depth, celebration rather than analysis. And even if Shaheen Bagh deserves panegyrics, wading through pages upon pages of soupy truisms can make one long for a flash of the polemicist's blade.

There is a brief glint when Aslam and Ausaf quote academic Prabhat Patnaik decrying the "systematic use of lies and half-truths to mislead the public", and "the unconcealed debunking of the Indian Constitution". Part of the tragic aftermath of Shaheen Bagh has been how a global pandemic has been used to defang dissent. Scores of young Muslim men, and at least one pregnant woman, have been arrested for their alleged parts in the Delhi riots, with questions about due process and evidence presented to courts working at reduced capacity muffled by mainstream media determined to look the other way. Glorious as the Shaheen Bagh protests were, they have not had the sweeping effect of the Black Lives Matter protests in Covid-ridden US, for instance.

This is not a criticism of these high-minded, if sometimes slapdash, books, but of our society which appears to resist asking itself discomfiting questions. "The idea of Shaheen Bagh has survived," writes academic Apoorvanand in his essay in Mustafa's anthology, "though the streets of Delhi have been stained with blood." Is this wishful thinking? Have we forgotten Shaheen Bagh and those tens of thousands across the country who took to the streets because they recognised the fundamental, un-Indian prejudice of the Citizenship Amendment Act, though it was presented to us as a fait accompli? We cannot know, so long as we continue to sequester ourselves on government advice except to shop and go to work.

Only months ago, these books remind us, the streets were full of opposition to a narrow, sectarian 'idea' of India. Those streets are now bereft. ■

ECONOMY

# Watch Out for Inflation Burns

**By M.G. Arun**

Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index (CPI or the weighted average of prices of a basket of consumer goods and services), stood at 6.9 per cent in July, breaching the upper band of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) inflation target for the fourth consecutive month. Inflation has been above the RBI's prescribed target of 4 per cent (plus or minus 2 per cent, so the upper band is 6 per cent) for 10 consecutive months now. CPI inflation was expected to fall with the easing of the lockdown but the July numbers show it is rising again. This will have serious repercussions on the economy. The central bank's rate cut spree is surely over. The RBI's monetary policy committee (MPC), in its announcement on August 6, left the repo rate (the rate at which commercial banks borrow from the RBI) unchanged at 4 per cent and the reverse repo rate at 3.35 per cent.

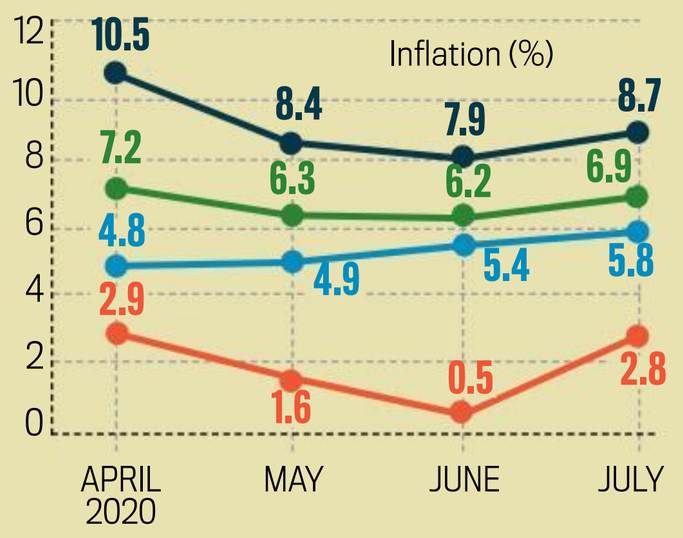
Keeping inflation in check enables the RBI to drop key rates and drive growth, as it has attempted to do earlier. Since the lockdown started, the central bank has cut repo rates by 115 basis points (1 percentage point equals 100 basis points). However, with demand still sluggish, reviving growth will be a slow, painful process.

The pandemic has left all calculations on the inflation front in tatters; the lockdown led to higher food prices as even essential goods got stuck at the farms and on highways in the initial days. That situation improved with a pick up in goods movement during the 'unlock' phases, but inflation in food and beverages was still at a four-month high of 8.7 per cent in July 2020, a huge jump over the 2.3 per cent in the corresponding month of the previous year. A Care Ratings note ascribes the inflationary pressure to supply disruptions from localised lockdowns in the states in July. Double-digit inflation among sub-components like meat (18.8 per cent), oils (12.4 per cent), vegetables (11.3 per cent), pulses (15.9 per cent) and spices has driven food inflation higher. Pulses saw double-digit inflation for the 10th consecutive month, while spices and oils too have been in double digits for four months. Fuel prices were also up, on higher taxes levied on these products. The rise in gold prices added another 50 basis points to the inflation rate.

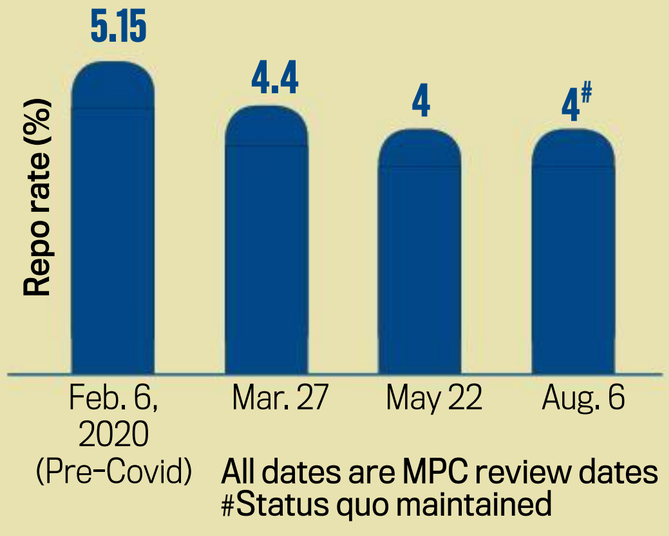
Experts forecast that supply-side disruptions will continue for some time. These disruptions will be on three fronts—labour, logistics and finance. Although the trend of migrants returning to their villages will ultimately reverse, it will also depend on a credible downtrend in Covid cases in the cities, which is yet to happen. Disruptions in logistics are mainly due to the selective reimposition of local lockdowns. But the most critical is the finance-led supply disruption, says an HSBC research note. As much as 85 per cent of India's labour force is employed in the unorganised sector, in firms that depend too heavily on their daily cash flows and do not have the buffer to withstand big economic shocks. If the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector fails, it will lead to considerable supply-side constraints.

To keep these firms alive, the banking system needs to allocate credit efficiently. "But the banks themselves have become extremely risk-averse, fearing a mountain of bankruptcies and non-performing loans because of the pandemic," says Pranjul Bhandari, chief economist at HSBC. Banks have not transmitted repo rate cuts to lending rates adequately. Credit growth, which was already weak, has weakened further over the pandemic months. "It is possible that the lack of funding will stoke inflation eventually," she adds. HSBC expects the next rate cut by the MPC only in the first quarter of the next calendar year, that too by 25 basis points. Meanwhile, a note from Care Ratings says while supply disruptions in food components will maintain an upward pressure on food prices, the release of kharif crops into the markets could ease food inflation to some extent. But the larger disruptions remain, and they threaten to further derail the economy. ■

## THE WORRY OF INFLATION




## HOW THE RBI CUT RATES DURING THE PANDEMIC




*Graphic by* ASIT ROY

AJAY SINGH RATHORE

AH ZAIDI

**DIFFERENT STRIPES** (Clockwise from top) An elevated rail and road passing through Mukundra reserve; tigress MT-2's carcass, discovered 48 hours after its death; MT-1, the surviving male

TIGER DEATHS

# PUGMARKS ARE DISAPPEARING IN MUKUNDRA

RAVINDRA SINGH TOMAR

By Rohit Parihar

There were four big cats in all, two males, two females, three of them translocated, one an interloper, who had wandered 150 km to find this range. It seemed like everything was in place for Mukundra Tiger Reserve (MTR), India's newest, launched just two years back near Kota in Rajasthan. All four adult tigers were from the Ranthambore National Park, and they had arrived in the one-year period between April 2018 and April 2019. And with both females, named MT-2 and MT-4, having cubs around May-June this year, officials were almost ready to call it another big cat success story for India.

Almost, for it all went downhill very fast. In the last 10 days of July, the park lost two of the four adult tigers (MT-2 and MT-3, the male who had wandered in), a cub was killed, while another, rescued in critical condition, died on August 17. Also, MT-4 and the newborns, caught on a trip camera in May, seem to have gone missing. "The deaths are a big setback...we'll have to rethink our strategy for the park," says a top officer of the Rajasthan forest and wildlife department.

The authorities suspect that one of the male tigers killed MT-2 and one of her cubs. A second cub is also now dead. The male MT-3 was reportedly anaemic and succumbed to some virus. Both the dead adult tigers had expensive radio tracking collars, but in an almost farcical situation, the satellite GPS system was on the blink because the government had not renewed the subscription.

"The tragedy has shocked me. It's sheer callousness that has led to the loss of our pride," says Diya Kumari, BJP MP and member of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). The Rajasthan government has taken action against a few officials, but sources at the park say things had not been right for some time now.

Notified in 2013, MTR stretches 780 sq. km across the Kota, Bundi, Chittorgarh and Jhalawar districts of Rajasthan. Encouraged by Sariska's partial success with translocation—eight big cats from Ranthambore were shifted there after poachers had wiped out the original population in 2005—the government chose Mukundra for the state's third tiger park. MTR has a capacity for 12 tigers and was a natural extension of Ranthambore—the big cats had been venturing out that side seeking new territories.

In 2018, the Rajasthan wildlife department shifted two tigers, a male (MT-1) and a female (MT-2), into an 80 sq. km enclosure in Mashalpura, located at the southern end of MTR. In February 2019, MT-3 suddenly made an appearance here. The entry created tensions between the two males. In April 2019, the tigress MT-4 was introduced, hoping she would be a distraction for MT-3. Critics say the authorities should have partially dismantled the enclosure; it would have reduced chances of friction between the males, and also given MT-2 enough space to hide her cubs if she felt unsafe with MT-1. MT-3's post-mortem revealed that the male was relying on easy-to-kill cattle. The tiger was also a bare bones 92 kg, suggesting it had been unwell for some time and the officials were clueless about it.

**The dead MT-3 tiger weighed just 92 kg, a sign that it had been sick for some time. Officials had no clue**

The lag of days in discovering the deaths—MT-2's carcass was found 48 hours after the tigress's death—especially in a small area, including an enclosure, suggests serious lapses, and reaffirms the findings that the state lacks proper tiger management, including veterinary doctors with expertise. The 2018 Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE), an audit of India's tiger reserves by the Union ministry for environment, forests and climate change, had downgraded two reserves in Rajasthan—Ranthambore and Sariska—from 'good' to 'fair'. Four parks were downgraded among the country's 50 tiger reserves. ■

# A PATHMAKER IN PUBLISHING, RETAILING, HOSPITALITY & EDUCATION.

Inspired by the Prime Ministers vision for India's development as a knowledge-acquiring as well as a learning society, Mr. Suneel Galgotia feels that imparting quality education at affordable costs is an important input for both the growth of the society as well as the individual.

## SUNEEL GALGOTIA

### CHANCELLOR, GALGOTIAS UNIVERSITY

Mr Suneel Galgotia, an educationist, philanthropist, and a humanitarian was born in New Delhi and completed his education from SRCC, Delhi University. He went on to establish, grow and diversify his family business of retailing, publishing and hospitality to a global level. He is now the founder chancellor of one of India's largest and most sought after university. This unmatched growth of Galgotias University is a culmination of delivering new technology courses, globally benchmarked hi-tech campuses, world-class faculty comprising thought leaders and practicing professionals, innovative technology based teaching methodology and an unparalleled corporate interaction.

#### YOUR BIG MOMENTS

There have been several moments which I have cherished in my journey for creating a university of global standards. One of our big moments was when Hon'ble Shri Narendra Modi ji gave Galgotias University an award for academic excellence. Chancellor Suneel Galgotia firmly believes in our Prime Ministers vision which says knowledge and education are not restricted to books. The purpose of education is to enable balanced growth of every dimension of a human being, which is not possible without innovation.

#### WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME AN EDUCATIONIST

Mr Suneel Galgotia saw a big gap in the higher education sector where there was a growing number of educational institutions but the quality of education was completely missing. He wanted to establish a university as a place of cutting edge learning, research and ensured that quality of education is delivered to the youth of this nation by offering them a world class curriculum, latest industry ready courses with placement Tie-ups and bringing together the best faculty minds from across the world.

Mr Suneel Galgotia is also prompted by the Prine Ministers vision for India's developement as a knowledge aswell as a learning society and feels that imparting quality education at affordable costs is an important input both for the growth of the society as well as for the individual.

#### MAKING BEST PROFESSIONALS FOR THE FUTURE

Properly imparting quality education and skill development in students can contribute to increase in the national gross product, brings about cultural richness, builds positive attitude towards use of technology, increases efficiency and effectiveness of the governance. Education opens new horizons for an individual, provides new aspirations and develops new values. It strengthens competencies and develops commitment. Education using todays cutting edge platforms generates in an individual a critical outlook on social and political realities and sharpens the ability to self-examination, self-monitoring and self-criticism which is very important for today's generation.The future agenda for education will be to empower individuals, assure high quality of life and pave way to learning society. The new system of education has to be rooted to culture and committed to progress.

#### UPLIFTING LIVES : TIPS FOR ASPIRING STUDENTS

My only tip to aspiring students is that "You can be the best and be anything you want to be in future. The time to make it happen starts now! So Stay the course and be focused". I firmly believe that there is no substitute for hard work and every student must stay focussed on the end goal and work towards achieving it in-spite of distractions, diversions and roadblocks which may come in the way for each of them.

# DHRUV GALGOTIA

## CEO, Galgotias University

Charismatic and an out of box thinker, Dhruv Galgotia is spearheading the making of Galgotia University as an Institute of Excellence. The youngest CEO, Dhruv has been honoured by national and international luminaries for his innovative global education system.

**DREAM PLAN:** With a knack for projecting pragmatism with idealism into work- life decisions, Dhruv has fast tracked the growth trajectory at Galgotia. Committed to international education in India, his focus is on collaborative global education system for greater impetus to academic excellence at Galgotias University. He also aims at providing a technology-based learning environment to the students so their interest is built in the subjects.

**TECHNOLOGY BASED LEARNING:** Dhruv Galgotia has always believed in the use of technology as an enabler to ensure learning is maximised and stays effective. "Using of artificial intelligence, augmented reality and IOT in education can amplify and enable learning abilities of students and make the classroom an interesting and effective space for students". ***I believe that Galgotias university is one of the first in India to use technology to enhance teaching and learning abilities.***

**HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT:** Blessed with energy of logic, Dhruv is firm believer in continuous research and innovation to identify and execute newer ways for real value addition to students' growth. Galgotia university today can proudly boast of many clubs like culture, fine arts, dance, recreation, sports etc ensuring the university as a hub of academic and human excellence.

**VISION:** "I have the vision of making our University to be a part of the "Institutions of Eminence" which may not only raise the quality of education of Indian universities, but also contribute towards making the country a shining example in the international world of education. India is a young country, that is hungry for the best quality education. I aim to fill that space and provide equal opportunities which everyone requires for fulfilling all aspiration to access quality and affordable living, "says Dhruv Galgotia.

**SUCCESS MANTRA:** My success mantra is to dream big and focus on achieving that dream. I feel it is also a mixture of hard work, perseverance, support of destiny and blessings from the almighty. To fill this gap and follow our quest of providing quality education, we established our institutions with a vision to provide our students with education and skills comparable to the best universities of the world.
So ultimately, it was my desire to think out of the box and also to a desire to achieve my goal and contribute to our nation. It gives me great pleasure to see our students securing good jobs in national and international companies. Their excellent performance is a source of pride for Galgotias", he adds

# ARADHANA GALGOTIA

## DIRECTOR OPERATIONS, Galgotias University

It is true that with the trends taking a shift, women are ruling the world like top leaders. They are not only excelling in all the fields they step into, they are bringing change in the fields with their innovative ideas. They are the change-makers in today's world. One such change-maker is Ms. Aradhana Galgotia, a joyful and vivacious woman. At 26 years of age, she is a lawyer by profession and an educationist at heart. Blessed with beauty and brains, she is dedicated to the pursuit of excellence at work and any responsibility she takes on. She runs by the motto of imbibing values before imparting in her life.
She studied Political Science from Jesus and Mary College. Later she graduated in LLB Law from Amity Law School, Noida. With her interest in gaining ample knowledge, she went to Queen Mary University of London to pursue LLM in Intellectual Property Rights.

**DRIVING FORCE:** Gaining exposure to international education, she realised that theoretical knowledge is not enough to survive in the industry. She felt the need that Indian education needs to be transformed to a more holistic teaching as well as learning system. She was so inspired with the international education system, she became passionate about transforming the education system here from less theoretical to more practical based learning. Aradhana is keen to ensure the enriched ambience at the family run Galgotias University. She views the world as a happy place and wants to enthuse joy of living in all.

**COMMITTED TO SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT:** A realist with a speculative mind, Aradhana is committed to the cause of social upliftment especially for women from broken homes. She is keen in providing them access to quality education, counselling and a healthy living and learning environment at Galgotia's. She believes that every woman must get quality education and succeed in her life just like she has.

COVER STORY

SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT

# THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT

**How the demise of a rising star went from a tragedy to sensational tinseltown controversy–and now the subject of a Supreme Court-monitored CBI probe**

BY SUHANI SINGH, KIRAN D. TARE AND AMITABH SRIVASTAVA

*Photograph by* BANDEEP SINGH

# WHO KILLED SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT?

The twists and turns in the Sushant Singh Rajput case would outfox even the most skilled of Bollywood's storytellers. The death of the 34-year-old actor at the height of his popularity stunned the country. His fans thought it was a suicide brought on by immense inner mental torment—an affliction he hid from the world. Then, as the drama unfolded amid a pandemic and a lockdown, an army of warriors started playing detective on social as well as conventional media. These self-appointed sleuths first billed his death as an outcome of the "movie mafia" in Mumbai filmdom, denying talented outsiders such as Sushant their due. Then, after an unexplained hiatus of 40 days, Sushant's family alleged foul play. The spotlight then shifted to Sushant's girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty and her family, whom Sushant's father Krishna Kishore Singh accused of siphoning off Rs 15 crore from his account and having abetted his suicide. In between, a convoluted potboiler began to simmer, one involving the death of Disha Salian, Sushant's manager briefly, a few actors and a political battle between two states and their police machinery. Suddenly, the word 'murder' began doing the rounds. On August 19, the case took its most dramatic turn when the Supreme Court, acting on Rhea's petition challenging an investigation by the Bihar police, handed over the probe to the Central Bureau of Investigation. The CBI must now find answers to the questions that have haunted headlines more than two months after Sushant died.

## What is the evidence that Sushant took his own life?

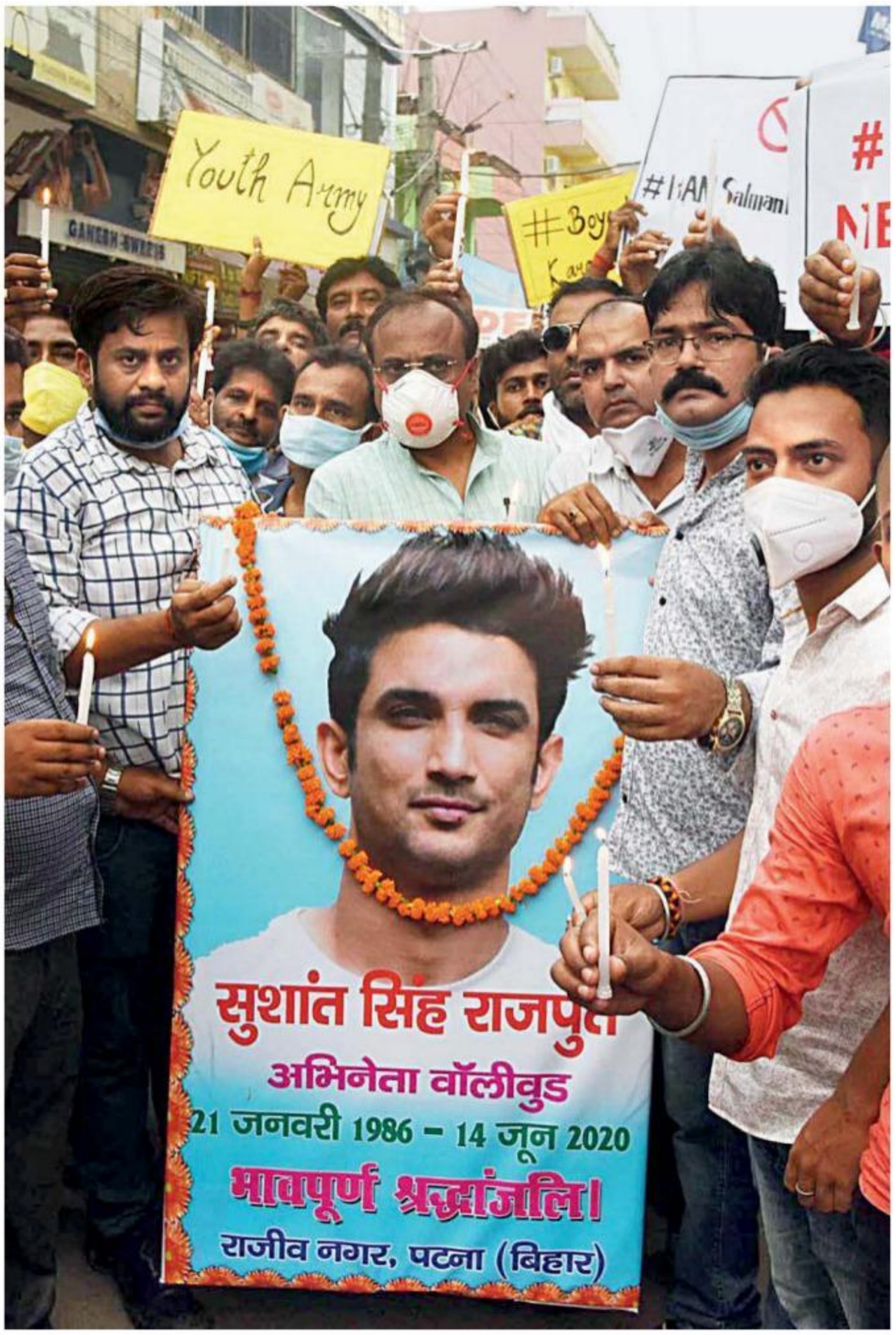
Nothing on June 14 suggested that the day would be any different for Sushant, who stayed on the sixth floor of a duplex apartment in the Mount Blanc housing society of Bandra in Mumbai. Around 8 am, he asked his domestic help Neeraj for a glass of cold water. For breakfast, he asked his cook Keshav to give him coconut water, juice and bananas. He didn't have the bananas. When Keshav went to ask him around 10 am what he wanted for lunch, he found the room locked. Assuming that Sushant wanted to sleep till late, everyone let him be. But when the actor did not open the door or answer the calls of Siddharth Pithani, his creative content manager and flatmate since January 2020, the staff grew concerned enough to hunt for a key and alert Sushant's sister Meetu, who lives in Mumbai suburb Goregaon, 16 km away. They decided that the lock had to be broken. Around 1 pm, a local locksmith broke the lock to the door. But rather than go into the room immediately, Pithani paid the locksmith Rs 2,000 and saw him off. He then came back, and went into Sushant's room, with house manager Dipesh Sawant and Neeraj following him. It was then that they found Sushant hanging from the ceiling fan.

Pithani says he brought the body down, severed the green kurta Sushant had used to hang himself and tried to revive him. Sushant's sister Meetu, too, had reached by then. There was no suicide note, a fact that has fuelled some controversy. The Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) in Kalina ruled out homicide in its report as nothing in the samples suggested foul play. FSL sources say the "tests of nails and the stomach wash showed no struggle or poisoning, respectively". The post-mortem report reached a similar conclusion, listing the cause of death as "asphyxia due to hanging". Based on the half-open eyelids, secretion

**Picture of Happiness**

Sushant and Rhea seen together in Mumbai on July 7 last year

GETTY IMAGES



**A Hero's Farewell**

Sushant's fans take out a candlelight march for him in Patna on June 16

**Last Rite**

Sushant's family immerses his ashes in the Ganga in Patna

GETTY IMAGES

# TWISTS IN THE SUSHANT TRAGEDY

A star's demise that has morphed into a national obsession. The many turns that have kept Sushant Singh Rajput's mysterious death alive in the public imagination

**APR. 2019**

Sushant Singh Rajput and Rhea Chakraborty start dating

**OCT. 2019**

Sushant, Rhea and her brother Showik cut short their holiday in Italy and return to Mumbai. Rhea has claimed she first saw signs of Sushant's mental illness during this trip.

**NOV.-DEC. 2019**

Rhea and Sushant consult Dr Susan Walker Moffat, a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. She diagnoses him with bipolar disorder and "suffering terribly during his bouts of depression and hypomania". Rhea moves into Sushant's home in Bandra.

**JAN. 20-24, 2020**

Sushant rings in his 34th birthday with two of his sisters in Chandigarh

**JAN. 21**

Rhea takes to Instagram to wish Sushant on his birthday with a photo of their Europe holiday in October. He replies with "Thank youuuuuuu my Rockstarrrr". It's the first sign of them acknowledging their relationship in public.

**MAR. 22**

Sushant shares his first post on Instagram in over six months

**FEB. 25**

IPS officer O.P. Singh, Sushant's brother-in-law, sends messages on WhatsApp to Paramjit Singh Dahiya, then Mumbai DCP Zone 9, sharing his concern for Sushant's well-being

**MAY 5**

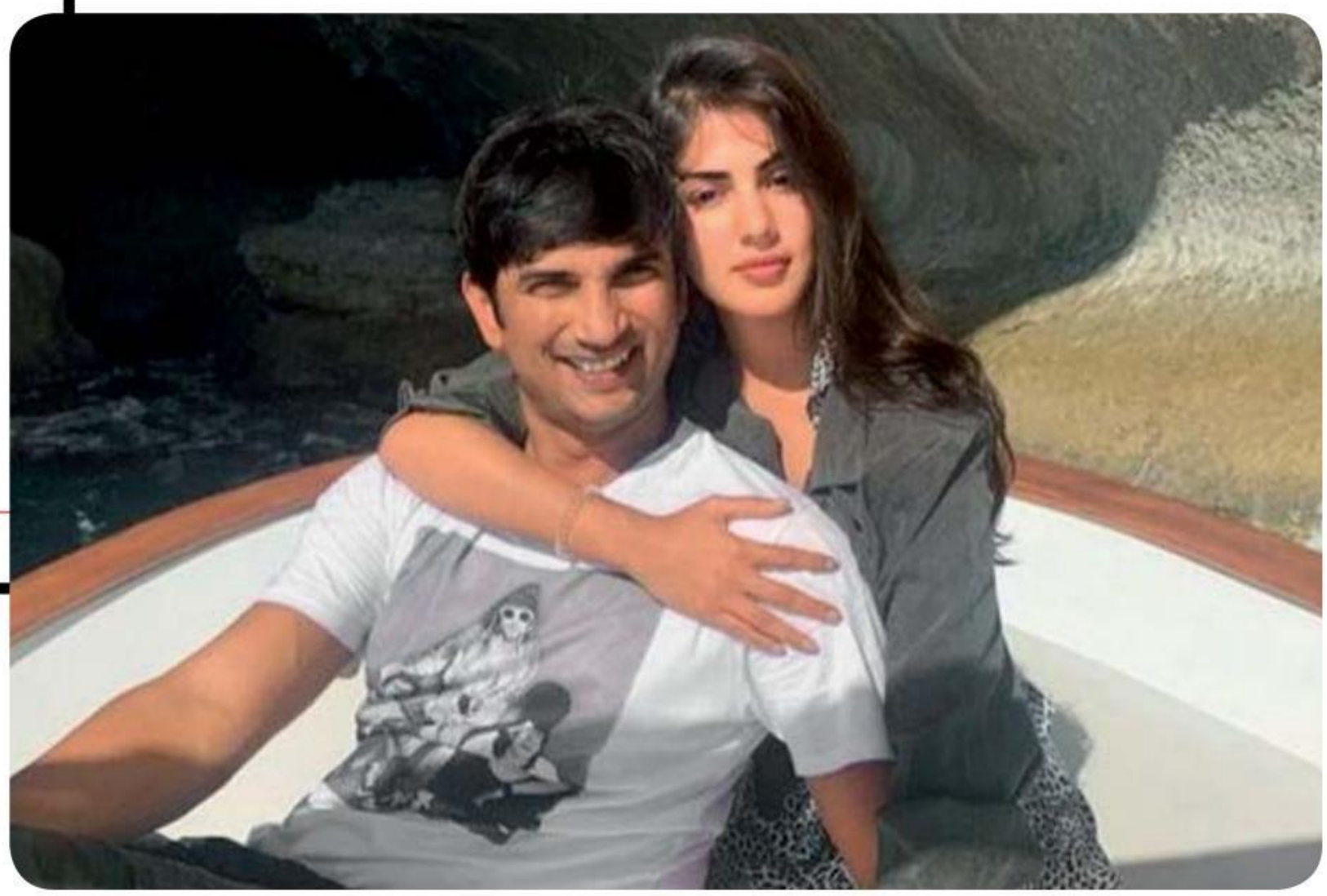
Sushant gives a sense of his Covid lockdown regimen, sharing a few "meta skills" which include "writing a journal" and "intermittent fasting"

**JUNE 8**

Rhea leaves Sushant's Bandra residence. Sushant's sister Meetu Singh arrives by evening and stays for a few days.

**JUNE 9**

Disha Salian, Sushant's former manager, falls to her death from the 14th floor of her fiance's building. Death described as accidental.



## JUNE 10

Siddharth Pithani, Sushant's creative content manager, says Sushant is at his "lowest" after he sees media reports associating Disha and him. They are said to have interacted only on a few occasions.

## JUNE 14

Sushant found dead at his Mumbai home. Mumbai police lodge an accidental death report.

## JUNE 15

★ Sushant's father K.K. Singh cremates his body in Mumbai
★ Actor Kangana Ranaut claims Sushant was a victim of a 'movie mafia' that promotes "nepo[tism] kids"

## JUNE 20

Bihar deputy CM Sushil Modi visits Sushant's Patna home to pay his condolences

## JUNE 25

Final post-mortem report confirms asphyxia due to hanging as cause of Sushant's death, calling it a clear case of suicide. Report rules out foul play. The viscera report affirms this.

ANI

## JULY 24

*Dil Bechara*, Sushant's final film, releases on Disney+ Hotstar. Available for free, it becomes the most streamed film in India, with over 50 million users accessing it, as per Ormax Media.

## JULY 16

Rhea tags Union home minister Amit Shah on Twitter and Instagram, demands CBI probe. Wants to understand 'what pressures prompted Sushant to take this step'.

## JUNE 30

In an interview to a website, Kangana says she "never interacted" with Sushant, but they shared "many close friends" who kept her posted on "what was going on in his life"

## JULY 25

Bihar police register FIR against Rhea and five others (including her family members) alleging abetment to suicide following K.K. Singh's complaint. He alleges Rhea and her family siphoned off Rs 15 crore of Sushant's money

## JULY 31

★ ED files money laundering case against Rhea, her brother, father and mother
★ A four-member Bihar police team lands in Mumbai to probe the FIR filed in Patna
★ Bihar deputy CM Sushil Modi accuses Maharashtra government of obstructing the probe by Bihar police, demands a CBI inquiry

ANI

## AUG. 2

Patna SP Vinay Tewari lands in Mumbai for the Sushant Singh probe, is forcibly quarantined by the BMC for 14 days

## AUG. 3

Mumbai police chief says no misappropriation of funds from Sushant's bank accounts

## AUG. 4

Bihar CM Nitish Kumar recommends CBI probe into the case

## AUG. 5

Centre tells Supreme Court it has accepted Bihar's recommendation and transferred the case to the CBI

## AUG. 6

CBI re-registers FIR against Rhea

## AUG. 7

★ CBI moves petition in SC, asking to be made party in the Sushant case
★ ED questions Rhea for eight hours in money-laundering case
★ Bombay HC adjourns hearing seeking CBI probe to Aug. 21.
★ Vinay Tewari is released from quarantine, asked to return to Patna

## AUG. 19

Supreme Courts hands over probe to the CBI

MILIND SHELTE

of semen on the shorts, the viscera report and the contents of the stomach, the forensic experts concluded that there is no foul play.

However, on July 25, almost six weeks after Sushant's death, his father K.K. Singh filed a complaint with the Patna police, stating that he suspected foul play. The family's advocate, Vikas Singh, outlined the family's reasons for suspicion. For one, they characterise Pithani's behaviour with the locksmith as peculiar. "Normally, you would open the door first before seeing the locksmith off. Why was he sent away first?" he asks. Singh cites other alleged inconsistencies in the Mumbai police probe following the actor's death. The Mumbai police say Sushant climbed on to his bed to hang himself. Singh argues that at six feet, Sushant was tall enough to touch the fan if he stood on his bed. According to him, when people want to hang themselves, they stand on a stool, slip the noose around their neck and then fling the stool away. Sushant, Singh adds, would have had to be in an inclined position to hang himself; even so he'd still have the support of the bed.

Dr Harsh Sharma, director, State Forensic Science Laboratory at Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, who has investigated over 800 suicide deaths, dismisses his claim. He told YouTube channel Crime Tak that once the noose is tied around the neck and connected to the anchor point, whether a person is standing, sitting or kneeling, the neck is compressed and all impulses to the brain are cut off, sending the body into a state of paralysis. The lack of bruises and abrasions on Sushant's body and the half-open eye were typical of suicidal hanging, he added.

## Did Sushant suffer from a serious mental disorder?

Sushant's family now even questions the Mumbai police's initial conclusion that the actor had a serious mental illness that could have led to him taking his life. That Sushant's interests extended beyond cinema is well-established. On his Instagram, one was more likely to find nuggets on his progress with 50 dream projects, navel-gazing or insights on astronomy than film-related posts. What would push a man with so many interests to take this tragic step?

Rhea Chakraborty, who describes herself as his "live-in partner", believes Sushant had been suffering from a serious mental disorder for the past eight months. She recalls that she first noticed it when she, Sushant and her brother Showik had taken a trip to Europe in October 2019. Rhea told officials investigating the case that the first episode occurred in a hotel room in Florence after they had seen the Goya painting, 'Saturn Devouring His Son'. Sushant, she said, was shaken and had hallucinated over the next few days. His condition got serious enough for them to cut short their trip. Between November and December 2019, Sushant and Rhea consulted Mumbai-based clinical psychologist and psychotherapist Dr Susan Walker Moffat, who diagnosed the actor as having a bipolar disorder. In a video statement shared with YouTube channel Mojo Story, Moffat said Sushant was "suffering terribly during his bouts of depression and hypomania". Moffat was one of at least four doctors Sushant reportedly consulted till March 2020. Rhea also revealed that she consulted Moffat for her own battle with anxiety and panic attacks.

In an August 1 interview to Aaj Tak television channel, Sushant's help Neeraj said the actor appeared to be 'down' ever since returning from his Europe trip. He also said that no party took place on the night before the suicide, as was alleged in some circles; Sushant barely stepped out during the lockdown.

In a June 18 post on Facebook that she later deleted, Sushant's sister Shweta Singh Kirti wrote, "I know you were in a lot of pain and I know you were a fighter and you were bravely fighting it." On August 3, Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh told the media that their inquiries had established Sushant as suffering from 'depression'. Pithani was witness to more telltale signs of Sushant's fragile mental state. The actor had asked him in January to urgently come to Mumbai (from Ahmedabad) and work with him. He told Pithani that he wanted to quit acting. "He said I don't have anyone right now," Pithani recalls. In a video interview to Zoom, he said the news of Disha Salian's death on June 9 affected Sushant so much that he cried and even fainted. "He was upset about his name being used again and again," Pithani said.

The Rajput family lawyer Singh denies all these allegations. "Sushant did not have any mental health issues till the end of 2019," he told INDIA TODAY. "If he was feeling depressed after 2019 or had any issues, Rhea is responsible for it."

## Could mental illness have led Sushant to commit suicide?

There were reports from some quarters that Sushant's mental torment was a result of the setbacks he faced in his career apart from discrimination in the industry. And it was this pressure that finally got to him. It is true that over the years, two big projects, that were particularly dear to Sushant and in which he had made con-

**Question Round**
Rhea arrives with brother Showik for ED interrogation in Mumbai on Aug. 15

siderable creative and physical investments, did fall through. One was Shekhar Kapur's *Paani*, which was shelved after differences between Kapur and producer Aditya Chopra, and the other was *Chandamama Door Ke*, a space drama for which Rajput had visited the US Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, for training. Serial entrepreneur Varun Mathur, Sushant's partner in his other company, Innsaei Ventures, started in 2018, cited a conflict of dates as the reason why the actor left the film.

But despite these prominent setbacks, Sushant regularly received offers of new roles in films. Rumi Jaffrey was going to direct a romantic comedy featuring him and Rhea. National Award-winning filmmaker Anand Gandhi had hoped Sushant would, as a friend, consider doing his next film set in the backdrop of the pandemic. Just a day before his death, producer Ramesh Taurani and director Nikhil Advani, in a call, had pitched a new project to Sushant.

Mental health experts say setbacks in career may not necessarily be the prime reason for mental torment. "There is no physical parameter one can look [at] and say one's depressed. Just because you are depressed does not mean you cannot function," says Mumbai-based psychologist Dr Shraddha Sidhwani. A practitioner for 17 years, she adds that the media's denial and trivialisation of mental health issues "is reversing the work psychiatrists have done in beating the stigma over the past decade". Sidhwani says it's common for patients to seek second opinions and change psychiatrists since they feel they have "lost control over" their minds. "It is more difficult for high achievers to accept the illness," she adds. Flatmate Pithani says Sushant had stopped taking medication in March.

Once known as manic depressive illness, the bipolar disorder that Sushant's psychiatrist diagnosed is associated with severe mood swings ranging

# THE GREAT GOOF-UP

**The Mumbai police made a series of mistakes, prompting the Bihar police to file an FIR and the case subsequently being transferred to the CBI. A look at what went wrong**

## 1 NOT FILING AN FIR

The Supreme Court, in 2013, had ruled that an FIR is mandatory in a cognisable case. The Mumbai police remained under the misapprehension that their filing an Accidental Death Report (ADR), under section 174 of CrPC (Criminal Procedure Code), which is the first thing to do, would not be challenged. This section is limited to an inquiry into the cause of an apparent unnatural death. As this is not a full-fledged probe, the Mumbai police could not defend themselves against the allegation that they were not serious about investigating the case.

## 2 LOSING THE PERCEPTION BATTLE

The Mumbai police hounded the Bihar police officers who had landed in the city to investigate Sushant's death. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation sent Patna city SP Vinay Tewari into a 14-day quarantine. All of this created a perception that the Mumbai police were trying to hide something.

## 3 MUM ON ALLEGATIONS

The Mumbai police did not officially react on the allegations of their Bihar counterparts. Several friends of Sushant, in media interviews, had raised questions about his death. The police made no efforts to clear their doubts.

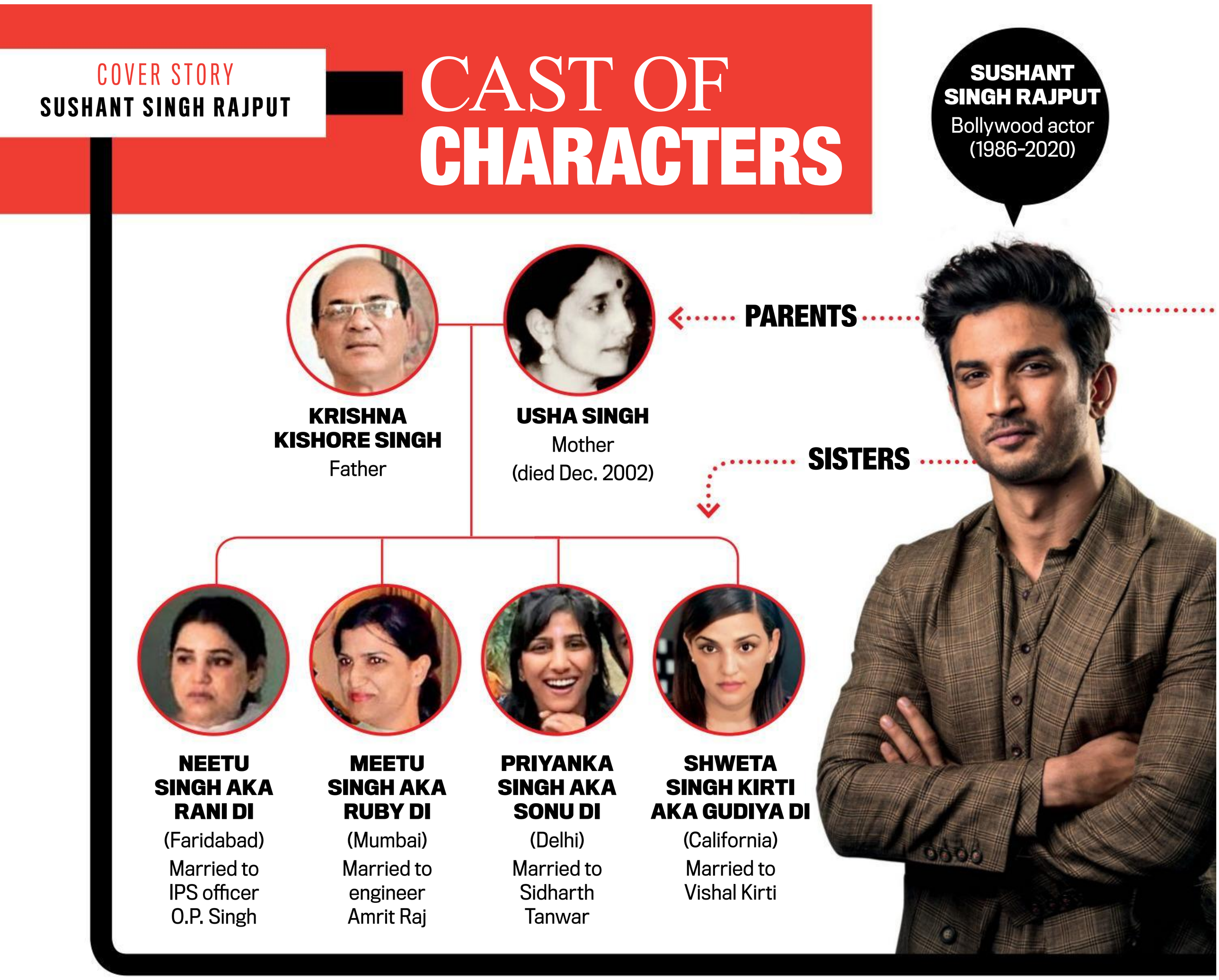
## 4 NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION

Sushant's postmortem report mentions asphyxia due to hanging as the cause of death, but the approximate time of his death is missing. The Mumbai police did not share full details of the report, which perhaps could have discouraged speculation over the actor's death.

## 5 JURISDICTION TANGLE

The Mumbai police thought they had the ultimate right to investigate the case as the crime took place in their jurisdiction. But on August 19, the Supreme Court made it clear that the police who have filed an FIR cannot be bound by jurisdiction. "Precedents suggest that at the stage of investigation, it cannot be said that the concerned police station does not have territorial jurisdiction to investigate the case."

# CAST OF CHARACTERS




from manic highs to depressive lows. There are no conclusive triggers for the illness, but experts largely attribute it to a chemical imbalance in the brain, genetics, or deep disturbances in the neurotransmitters. The consensus is that symptoms show up in the second decade of life. "It could begin with episodes of mania—excessive spending, high energy, delusions of grandeur and disturbed sleep; and, after a while, depressive tendencies take over—low energy, low concentration, poor memory and a tendency to harm oneself. In some people it occurs the other way round," explains Dr B.N. Gangadhar, director of NIMHANS, Bengaluru.

It is hard to diagnose bipolar patients because the symptoms need not always be evident. Many patients hide their symptoms for fear of stigma or out of shame. Dr Purnima Nagaraja, a Hyderabad-based psychiatrist, says: "Bipolar patients could also have personality disorders. Some of them could have more tendencies for depression... it differs from patient to patient."

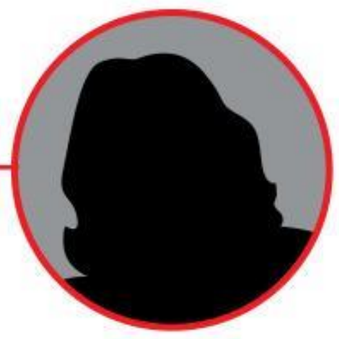
Medication and therapy are essential for bipolar patients, especially among those who are strongly suicidal. "If a person has an established disorder then, through appropriate counselling and medication, any mental health patient can lead a fully functional and stable life," says Dr Gangadhar. If left untreated, the symptoms in most patients are self-limiting, he adds.

But even if the symptoms aren't always permanent, for most patients, their severity, particularly the depressive episodes, are unbearable to withstand. It can lead to severe feelings of guilt, abandonment, a sense of not being wanted and of extreme hopelessness. A 2015 study titled 'Suicide Attempts in Bipolar Disorder', published in the National Center for Biotechnology Information, a US-based resource for the scientific research community, estimates that between 25 per cent and 60 per cent of individuals with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once in their lives, and 4 per cent

## ACCUSED (IN FIR)

**RHEA CHAKRABORTY**
Actress, Sushant's live-in partner

**INDRAJIT CHAKRABORTY**
Rhea's father. A retired army surgeon, his property is listed as the registered address of the two firms started by Sushant



**SANDHYA CHAKRABORTY**
Rhea's mother; a homemaker

**SHOWIK CHAKRABORTY**
Rhea's younger brother, director of Vividrage Rhealityx Pvt Ltd and Front India for World Foundation, a company and a trust started by Sushant

**SAMUEL MIRANDA**
Sushant's house manager, allegedly hired by Rhea

**SHRUTI MODI**
Sushant and Rhea's former business manager

VIKRAM SHARMA

## OCCUPANTS AT SUSHANT'S RESIDENCE

**SIDDHARTH PITHANI AKA BUDDHA**
Sushant's creative content manager and flatmate since Jan. 2020

**NEERAJ SINGH**
House help

**KESHAV BACHNER**
Cook and house help

**DIPESH SAWANT**
House manager

to 19 per cent see it through to the end. Psychiatrists say depression in bipolar patients can be extreme. It often overrules logic and positive feelings in a patient, prompting some to turn suicidal, as they are unable to find hope or feel good about themselves and their lives.

## Did his relationship with Rhea drive Sushant to suicide?

The 34 years and 146 days of Sushant Singh Rajput's life are now largely being seen through the time he spent with Rhea Chakraborty, the actress he began dating in April 2019. Rhea and Sushant knew each other from when they were both talents at Yash Raj Studios in 2012. Sushant had a three-film contract with the studio, beginning with *Shuddh Desi Romance* (2013), while Rhea had been signed on for the Y-Films project *Mere Dad Ki Maruti*. At the time, Rajput was in a live-in relationship with his *Pavitra Rishta* co-star Ankita Lokhande with whom he would part ways in 2016.

While Sushant's career took off after he left Yash Raj to do *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*, Rhea's failed to strike such a high note. Sushant found fame with *Kedarnath* and *Chhichhore*, Rhea struggled as her films failed at the box office. Their paths eventually crossed again in mid-April 2019 in Mumbai.

As in many dalliances in the film world, the two didn't confirm their relationship in public. At the Mind Rocks Youth Summit in Delhi in September 2019, Sushant described his relationship status as "*bilkul* single" and then clenched his teeth on the side. But, by then, there were enough signs suggesting that love was in the air—photos of Rhea ringing in her birthday on July 1, 2019, in Ladakh with Sushant and friends, the various sightings outside gyms and restaurants and the October trip to Europe. By December 2019, Rhea had moved in with Sushant in his Bandra apartment and stayed there until her departure on June 8 which, she says, she did at Sushant's request as he wanted her gone before his sister Meetu arrived later in the day.

Things had soured between Rhea and Sushant's

# SINGHS VS. CHAKRABORTYS

Critical questions surrounding Sushant Singh Rajput's death and the contesting versions of the families of the deceased actor and Rhea Chakraborty

**Sushant Singh Rajput was found dead in his Mumbai flat on June 14. The family filed a complaint with the Patna police on July 25. Why did they wait for 40 days to do so?**

**Sushant's family:** We had given up on the Mumbai police. We waited for them to take some right action, but when we saw them heading completely in the wrong direction, we decided to register a complaint.

**Rhea's family:** Their lawyer Satish Maneshinde says that Sushant's family made no allegations whatsoever before the Mumbai police or to any authority till July 27. Their statements were recorded by the police in Mumbai. The allegations are totally concocted and fabricated for ulterior purposes. Rhea denies all allegations, be it abetment to suicide or misappropriation of funds.

**Why is Sushant's family now saying it is a murder when they initially blamed Rhea Chakraborty for 'abetment to suicide'?**

**Sushant's family:** After deciding to get an FIR registered, the family wanted to press for murder charges. The circumstances suggested that murder couldn't be ruled out. The family had pressed for abetment to suicide charges (against Rhea) in the FIR based on what Siddharth Pithani (Sushant's creative content manager) told them about Rhea. As he was Sushant's close friend and flatmate, the family believed him. However, after the FIR was registered and Pithani's name did not figure among the accused, he started backing Rhea. It was Pithani's U-turn that made the family take a deeper look at some of the things—Sushant's body had one eye open, the suspicious mark on the neck, there was no photo/ video evidence to prove that he was found hanging.

**Rhea's family:** Siddharth Pithani has alleged that two of Sushant's family members asked him to testify that Rhea siphoned off Rs 15 crore from the actor's bank account. "I have no idea about this," Pithani told India Today TV. "I don't want to say something I don't mean to." Pithani informed Mumbai police about the calls via an email. Maneshinde says the ED and police have examined Rhea's income tax details and found nothing incriminating in them.

**Family Time**
Sushant Singh Rajput with his father and sisters

**Why does Sushant's family doubt suicide?**

**Sushant's family:** Sushant was 6 feet tall. Standing on the bed, he could have touched the fan above and there would have been no space. People wanting to hang themselves climb on a stool, tie themselves with a rope and kick the stool away—that way, there is no way to save them. In Sushant's case, he would have had to get into an inclined position to hang himself from the bed. On struggling for breath, he would have automatically come back to the bed as the fan was over it. Then, the cloth used for hanging was cut from the noose and not the knot by which it was supposedly tied to the ceiling fan. Why would anyone do that? The mark on Sushant's neck is also suspicious. There is also talk of a stun-gun (being used on Sushant). The autopsy report does not have the time of his death.

**Rhea's family:** The report of the forensic lab in Kalina (Mumbai) ruled out homicide as nothing in the samples had suggested foul play. The postmortem report had also concluded the cause of death to be "asphyxia due to hanging". In an interview to YouTube channel Crime Tak, Dr Harsh Sharma, director, State Forensic Science Laboratory, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, ruled out homicide. The eye position, he said, is "typical of suicidal hanging" and "suggestive of sympathetic compression of carotid artery". "Once the neck is compressed, impulses from the brain are cut off and the body enters a state of paralysis," Dr Sharma explained.

## Anomalies in the suicide theory

**Sushant's family:** Sushant's sister Meetu Singh was just 10 minutes away, they should have waited for her. (She was at Goregaon, at least a 20 minute drive from Bandra if the roads are empty.) A locksmith was called to open the locked door. Once he had done the job, he was taken away. (The locksmith broke the lock. However, no one seemed to be in hurry to open the door. The locksmith was taken downstairs before the door was opened.)

**Rhea's family:** In televised interviews, Pithani has said that he had followed Meetu Singh's instructions over phone to bring Sushant's body down in the hope that he was still alive, and that he tried to revive him by pumping his chest.

## Role of the Mumbai police

**Sushant's family:** The Mumbai police were required to complete the inquest process. Instead, they started calling people from the film industry in the name of probing nepotism, which cannot be the direct cause of death. There are so many unanswered questions. The more you deal with them, the more you realise that there's foul play.

## What could be the motive for murder?

**Sushant's family:** Advocate Vikas Singh says several theories need to be probed, and whether murder or suicide, Rhea is completely involved. An impartial agency, like the CBI, should find out the truth, he says.

**Rhea's family:** Maneshinde says Rhea had herself called for a CBI investigation. Since the Supreme Court has transferred the case to the CBI, she will appear and face the investigation like she did with Mumbai police and the ED. The truth, he says, will remain the same whichever agency investigates.

## Why does Sushant's family blame Rhea?

**Sushant's family:** If Sushant was disturbed mentally, would he tell Rhea to block his number? There was not a single conversation in his last six days.

**Rhea's family:** Maneshinde says Rhea left Sushant's home on June 8 reluctantly, on his request, and told him to "let her or her brother know about anything he required or if he needed to talk".

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***SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT'S FAMILY***

*Represented by Vikas Singh*

***RHEA CHAKRABORTY'S FAMILY***

*Represented by Satish Maneshinde*

family in the initial stages of their romance. Rhea's advocate Satish Maneshinde, in an interview to INDIA TODAY, claimed that in April 2019, when she was staying with Sushant at his apartment for a few days, the actor's sister Priyanka and her husband were also there. On one occasion they had attended a party together and later, while Rhea was asleep in Sushant's bedroom, an inebriated Priyanka had allegedly groped Rhea. Rhea moved out soon after but not before informing Sushant of the incident, leading to a falling out between the two siblings. The Rajput family lawyer vehemently denies the charge against Priyanka, saying, "It is a completely false allegation and Sushant had even apologised to his sister later on this. The entire family knew it was a false allegation."

The family blames Rhea for creating barriers between them and Sushant. The rift sharpened after December 2019 when Rhea moved in with him. The actor did reduce contact with his father and sisters at this time, but celebrated his 34th birthday with his sisters, Meetu and Neetu, in Chandigarh between January 20 and 24. According to what Sushant's friend Mahesh Shetty told the police, Rhea had also fired all of the actor's staff members—cook, manager and bodyguard—and hired replacements. Sushant and Shetty go back to their days of acting together in the TV show *Pavitra Rishta*. Sushant had tried to connect with Shetty late at night on June 13.

Meanwhile, Rhea's brother Showik, 24, grew close to Sushant, becoming a frequent visitor to his Bandra house and the director of the two companies Sushant started—Vividrage Rhealityx Pvt Ltd (which had Rhea as part of its name), a firm dealing with mixed reality, experimental technology and artificial intelligence, and Front India for World Foundation, a non-profit organisation working to promote healthcare and eradication of hunger, poverty and malnutrition. On July 24, Showik would take to Instagram to describe his feelings towards Sushant, the "catalyst" in his life, writing that "you believed in love and spreading as much love as you could even though you were fighting a battle of your own".

Rhea and Sushant's relationship had become increasingly troubled in recent months on account of his alleged mental illness. According to Maneshinde, "Sushant had been calling his family, informing them of his decision to move out of Mumbai and requesting them to come and meet him. After several days of Sushant calling and crying over the phone, his sister Meetu agreed to come live with him on June 8, 2020. Due to this development, Sushant requested Rhea to live with her parents for the time being. Even though Rhea wanted to see her family, she was not at all comfortable leaving Sushant." On July 14, a month after his death, Rhea wrote on Instagram: "My words are incapable of expressing the love we have and I guess you truly meant it when you said it is beyond both of us... Eternally connected."

However, the Rajputs' advocate Singh claims that this is,

in fact, a complete lie and says, "Sushant's sister had to go and stay with him because Rhea had left. Rhea should explain why she blocked Sushant's number if she had gone at his behest." On August 20, a WhatsApp chat between Rhea and filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt, who produced her last release *Jalebi* (2018), surfaced. The exchange on June 8, the day Rhea left Sushant's house, suggests she had broken up with him. Bhatt reportedly asked her not to look back. "Make it possible what is inevitable," he wrote.

## Did Rhea embezzle Sushant's money and abet his suicide as his father alleges?

While the police's account that this was a suicide seemed cut and dried, the case took a completely different turn when Sushant's father K.K. Singh filed a police complaint in Patna on July 25, alleging foul play and accusing Rhea of abetting Sushant's suicide and siphoning off Rs 15 crore from his bank account. The Patna police filed an FIR the same day against Rhea, three of her family members—father Indrajit, mother Sandhya and brother Showik—Samuel Miranda (house manager) and Shruti Modi (former business manager) under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, including 306 (abetment of suicide), 341 (punishment for wrongful restraint), 342 (punishment for wrongful confinement), 380 (theft in dwelling house), 406 (punishment for criminal breach of trust) and 420 (cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property).

Attempting to explain why Sushant's father took nearly six weeks after his death to file a complaint, family lawyer Singh says he was forced to do so because he had 'given up on the Mumbai police'. "We waited for them to take some action. But when we saw they were completely going in the wrong direction, we decided to file a complaint in Patna," Singh said. For reasons that remain unclear, the Mumbai police chose not to file an FIR and played down the probe (see *The Great Goof-Up*).

Sushant was said to be close to his family till his relationship with Rhea caused friction with them. Krishna Kishore retired from the State Handloom Corporation in Patna, where he was a section officer, some 16 years ago. Sushant was the youngest of his five children. "We all are from a middle class family. My uncle too has had his struggles," recalls Neeraj Kumar Bablu, son of Krishna Kishore's elder brother and a BJP MLA.

Sushant was born in Bihar's Purnea district and did his schooling till the 10th grade at Patna's St. Karen's High School. Neighbours remember him as shy and unassuming but academically brilliant. He then moved to Delhi to finish high school and pursue engineering. He got into the Delhi College of Engineering (now Delhi Technical University), but dropped out in the final year of his course in 2005 to pursue a career in acting.

Divya Gautam, Sushant's cousin, says the actor continued to maintain a very close bond with his family. He also reportedly supported his father financially and took care of his medical treatment when he came to stay with him in 2018. Just days before his death, Sushant is said to have spoken to the house help in Patna, telling her to take greater care of his father during the Covid pandemic.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED), while going into Krishna Kishore's charges against Rhea, are finding it difficult to come up with evidence. That Rhea didn't have a career as successful as Sushant's led to accusations of her being a "gold digger", Rhea herself noted in an Instagram post. The ED is yet to find any evidence of a transfer of any big sum to Rhea's or her family's bank accounts, as per the bank statements filed by Sandeep Sridhar, Sushant's accountant since last year. Sushant's big transactions, Sridhar told Aaj Tak on July 31, pertained mainly to "lifestyle expenses" typical of film stars. They involved paying rent, including for his farmhouse in Pavana, travels abroad and staff salaries. As per his bank statements, he filed at least Rs 2.78 crore in GST and income tax, paid Rs 61 lakh to talent management agency CAA Kwan, and monthly instalments for a flat he bought in Malad early in his career. Sridhar also said that Sushant never had Rs 15 crore in his account to transfer it to anyone. Priyanka Khemani, Sushant's lawyer, told India Today TV that the Sushant she knew "always made his own decisions" even when it came to "handling his finances".

With the CBI stepping in, the Mumbai police will now have to transfer all case material, including the spot *panchnama*, the postmortem and inquest reports and the CCTV footage, to the central agency. The CBI will have to interrogate all the witnesses present at the scene of the incident and visit Sushant's apartment to recreate the sequence of events. If it concludes that Sushant's death was a case of suicide, it will then have to establish whether or not there was abetment. For that it will have to interrogate eyewitnesses again and assess whether Sushant was indeed pushed into taking his life. Proving abetment to suicide is always tricky. To do that, the CBI would have to identify a clear motive for this crime. The agency unfortunately doesn't have much of a reputation for solving cases in recent years. Sushant may have chosen to take his life to end all the questions troubling him. Little would he have known that his suicide would raise even more questions. Finding the answers to them is the only way we can bring closure to a bright young life cut short needlessly. ■

***–with Sonali Acharjee and Divyesh Singh***

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# LASERS IN DERMATOLOGY

In dermatology, expectations of clients are unending. If pimples get cured they will ask for treatment of scars. Sometimes stubborn dark spots for which clients go from dermatologist to dermatologist, fall prey to fancy advertisements, easily listen to useless advice by friends and relatives and end up with irrational combination creams application on face and its many side effects. Diseases of modern life like polycystic ovarian syndrome and hormonal disturbances can cause unwanted hair growth on face and body in females which is very embarrassing for them. many birth marks for which nothing can be done, are real challenges. Many people do permanent tattoos on body and later on dislike it. For many such conditions laser therapy is a boon.

Laser is light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation. Laser light can target various pigments and cells in skin and can cure variety of conditions. It can target water in tissue, melanin in skin or hair, haemoglobin and can treat variety of conditions.
Laser treatments are expensive as these machines are quite expensive and need maintenance cost as well. Laser treatment is generally done by qualified skin specialists and plastic surgeons. Laser light is fired on the skin which goes inside the skin, targets the chromophore and treat underlying conditions for e.g. if laser treatment is being done for unwanted hairs, it will target melanin in the hair. So melanin in hair bulb will absorb laser energy, in that process hair follicle will get heated and gradually get destroyed leading to destruction of hairs after several treatments. For effective hair reduction, 8-10 sessions are required 1 to 2 months apart depending on the body site. Hair laser treatment is painless and has no side effects if done by experienced hands. Diode laser is commonly used by Indian dermatologists for unwanted hair removal.

Other common indication for laser treatment is scars on face or pits on face. Carbon dioxide laser works well for treatment of scars and resurfacing. It is generally done once in 2 months. After 4-5 sessions scars get filled significantly. Filling of scars is due to collagen induction by co2 laser. After co2 laser sometime little downtime in the form of redness,stinging and darkening of treated area is expected which settles down after few days.

Q switch ND yag laser is used to treat dark spots on face, for removal of tattoos and stubborn pigmentation. It is done once in 1 to 2 months till complete disappearance of the skin condition.
IPL laser- this machine tackles many conditions like some birth marks, persistent redness after acne and severe hard pimples.

## What ailments can be treated with laser

Unwanted hairs—
Dark spots on skin
Ageing skin signs like wrinkles, loose skin, dilated pores
Tattoo removal
Birth marks
Freckles
Scars or pits of pimples or chickenpox
Laser toning for dark skin
Hard pimples and redness after pimples.

## What precautions should be taken after laser treatment

Protect treatment area from sunlight
Use mild cleansers on treated area
don't apply irritant creams on treated area for few days
follow treatment protocol as per schedule.

Laser treatments are slow—some people think that tattoo will go overnight with laser treatment. So they come to us and tell, doc. my medical fitness test is next week so I want to get rid of this tattoo, which is not possible. It may take 3-6 months for complete disappearance of tattoo. So plan your treatment accordingly. Same is the case with other kind of pigmentations, hair reduction, scars etc. so if someone has an important event plan laser treatment 3-6months before.

Don't keep unrealistic expectations. Means if you do laser, your condition may not improve 100%.
Some patients who do laser for unwanted hairs may need maintenance treatment after complete laser protocol…
If someone is doing laser for scars, depth of scars can be reduced 60-70% but not 100%
If someone is doing laser for anti-ageing purpose some textural improvement, reduction in fine lines, increased radiance can be noticed after laser but 50-year-old person cannot be made to look like 30-year-old person. So keep realistic expectations before undergoing laser treatment

## Is laser treatment is useful for the skin

If aging, acne, or too much time in the sun has left your face with blotches, scars, wrinkles, or lines, laser skin resurfacing may help your skin look younger and healthier. Laser skin resurfacing removes skin layer by layer with precision. …

## Can laser hair removal cause cancer?

It's a myth that laser hair removal can cause cancer. In fact, according to the Skin Care Foundation, the procedure is sometimes used to treat certain forms of precancerous lesions.

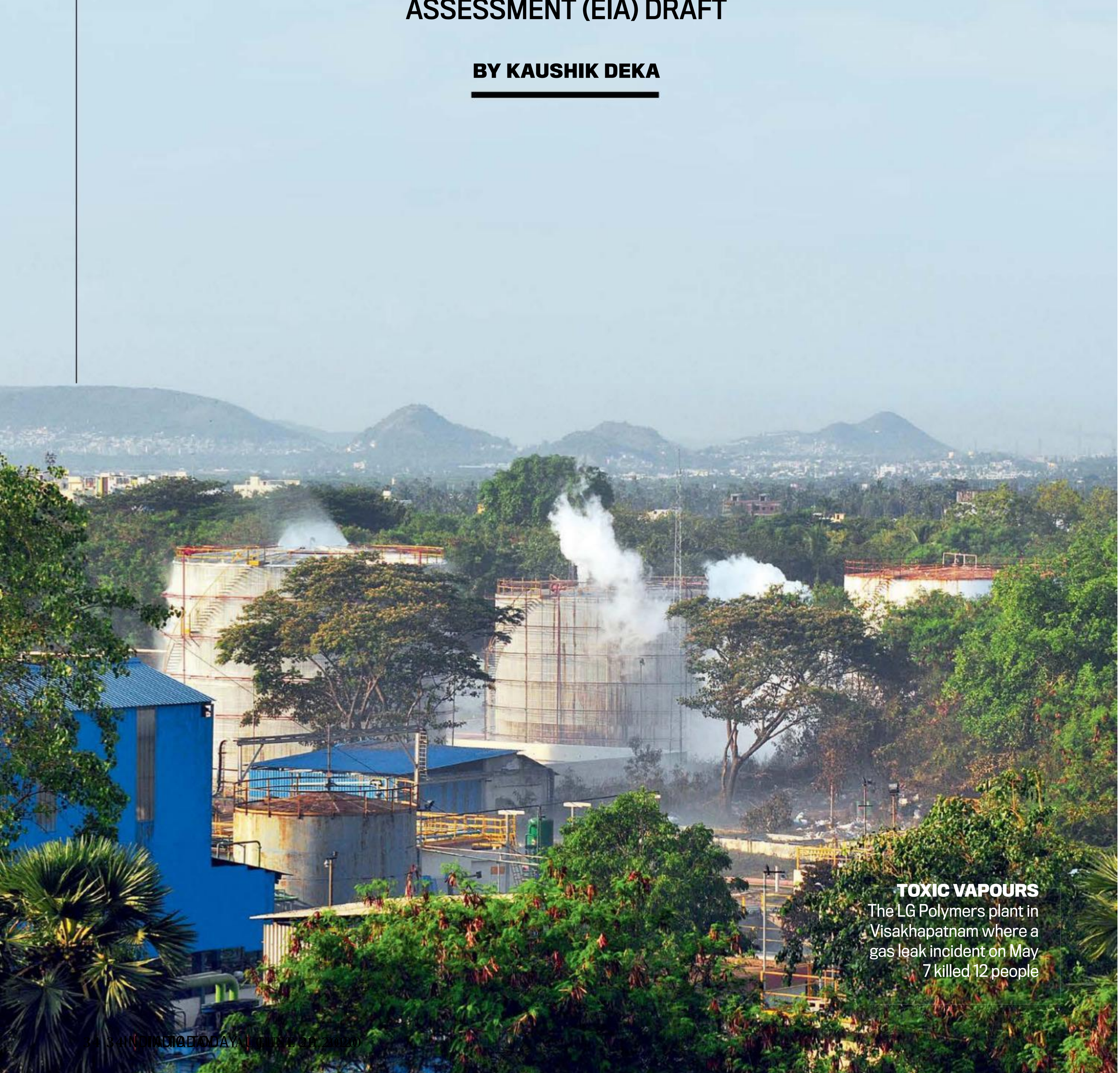
## Is laser hair removal permanent?

While laser hair removal doesn't get rid of hair forever it does drastically reduce hair growth—to the point that you can stop shaving altogether. You can get it done anywhere on the body, and the machine can cover large places

# GREEN OVERSIGHT

## ACTIVISTS CALL IT A SELLOUT, THE GOVERNMENT CLAIMS IT HAS TIGHTENED NORMS. THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NEW ENVIRONMENT IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) DRAFT

**BY KAUSHIK DEKA**



**TOXIC VAPOURS**
The LG Polymers plant in Visakhapatnam where a gas leak incident on May 7 killed 12 people

Ever since it was made public on March 23, the draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2020, by the Union ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC) has invited severe criticism from environmentalists, activists and legal professionals. They allege that the central government is diluting the green clearance norms. Issued under Section 3 of the Environment Protection Act, 1986, the EIA notification prescribes procedures to regulate activities that impact our environment. India notified its first EIA norms in 1994, which were replaced in 2006. After 14 years, the Union government now wants to amend the norms to make the process "more transparent and expedient".

Critics, however, claim the 2020 draft notification, if implemented, will not only favour industry over the fragile environment, but also limit public participation in environmental decision-making, and even reward violators. Most of them also allege that the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's focus on enhancing ease of doing business has come at the cost of environmental degradation. In the past six years, India has seen a steady rise in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking, up from No. 142 in 2014 to 63 in 2019. In sharp contrast, India's rank in the Environmental Performance Index by the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy dropped from 155 in 2014 to 168 this year (out of a list of 180 countries). "Environment and development are seen as trade-offs, which is not the case. The government must do a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis, including the impact of development on nature and natural capital. This EIA has not done that," says Pushpam Kumar, chief environmental economist, UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

The debate has now taken a political turn with Congress and BJP leaders trading charges. Commenting on the EIA, Congress president Sonia Gandhi recently asked the government to "stop dismantling India's environmental regulations". Her son and former party president Rahul Gandhi said: "The draft is not only disgraceful, it is dangerous. Not only does it have the potential to reverse many of the hard-fought gains that have been won over the years in the battle to protect our environment, it could potentially unleash widespread environmental destruction and mayhem across India."

His party colleague and former environment minister Jairam Ramesh, who is also the chairman of the Rajya Sabha Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment, Forests and Climate Change, has been engaged in a 'letter war' with the current environment minister, Prakash Javadekar, calling the EIA draft "anti-democratic, anti-public health and anti-cooperative federalism". Congress's new-found ally, the Shiv Sena, also joined the bandwagon with its leader and Maharashtra environment minister Aaditya Thackeray claiming the new draft failed to align with the 2016 Paris climate agreement and posed a threat to the goal of sustainable growth.

Javadekar has slammed the critics for "jumping the gun", saying the notification is only a draft and all public concerns will be addressed in the final version. "There have been 55 amendments to the 2006 EIA notification and 230 office memorandums issued. The EIA 2020 notification is only a compilation of these changes," he told INDIA TODAY. Some experts do agree that the new draft formalises and streamlines several ad hoc processes. "By and large, the scheme of things developed in the draft notification appears sensible," says Promode Kant, director, Institute of Green Economy.

The environment ministry has been examining the 1.8 million public views it has received on the EIA before finalising the notification. Meanwhile, on August 5, the Karnataka High Court issued an order to the MoEFCC restraining the publication of the final notification till September 7. A division bench said: "Prima facie, it appears to us that the right of citizens to file objection has been taken away."

**"The EIA touches on ecological damage and economic benefit assessment but not in detail. No listing and estimation of damage costs and loss in economic benefits is provided which leaves it open to different interpretations"**

**MADHU VERMA**
*Chief economist, World Resources Institute*

ANI PHOTO

## The controversies

The most controversial change in the notification is Clause 22 which allows projects running without environmental clearance to seek fresh permission and get away with the violation by paying a penalty. Critics see this "ex post facto" approval as a gross violation of the mandate given to the environment ministry. "It will turn the EIA process from being one of prior approvals to that of post-facto clearances," says Kanchi Kohli, environmentalist with the Centre for Policy Research.

The provision, however, is not new. In May 2002, a circular issued by the environment ministry in the first NDA government allowed industries that had commenced operations without getting green clearances to obtain the same by 2003. It was supposed to be a "last and final opportunity" for errant projects. The Congress-led UPA government then issued three office memorandums in 2010, 2012 and 2013 granting ex post facto approvals to several projects.

In January 2016, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) held that the May 2002 circular was contrary to the law. The NGT issued instructions to revoke the approvals and shut down the industries. In March 2017, the MoEFCC passed another notification stating that any project functioning without prior approval could apply for environmental clearance. Meanwhile, the committee of the environment ministry held more than 30 meetings to clear hundreds of such projects that violated environment clearance norms. This, despite a Supreme Court verdict in August 2017 saying that "the grant of an ex post facto environmental clearance would be detrimental to the environment and could lead to irreparable degradation of the environment".

The apex court reiterated its stand in April this year while hearing a case related to three Gujarat industrial units operating without valid environment clearances. It also upheld the 2016 NGT order. But while penalising the errant industries, the apex court decided against their closure, saying "the directions of the NGT for the revocation of the environmental clearances and for closure of the units do not accord with the principle of proportionality". In 2011, too, in the *Lafarge Umiam Mining vs Union of India* case, the SC had applied the doctrine of proportionality and held that non-compliance could not lead to closure of an establishment.

Industry watchers welcome the move. "This is an opportunity for violators to become compliant; a window for them to join the mainstream with no guarantee that the appraisal process that they are signing up for will give an outcome in their favour. If we can put in a cut-off date with this provision, this is a welcome step to mainstream the defaulters while not encouraging them," says Yasir Ahmad, partner, sustainability and responsible business advisory, PwC India.

Javadekar emphasises that the violator also has to put in place a remedial plan for environmental damage the project may have caused, accounting for 1.5 times of the assessed ecological damage and economic benefit derived due to violation. And if there is a pollution load, the violator will have to pay a polluters'

**"Environment and development are seen as trade-offs, which isn't the case. The government must do a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis, including the impact of development on nature and natural capital. This EIA has not done that"**

**PUSHPAM KUMAR**
*Chief environmental economist, UN Environment Programme (UNEP)*

ANI PHOTO

## FAST-TRACKED

**THE MODI GOVERNMENT HAS SPEEDED UP ENVIRONMENTAL CLEARANCES FOR PROJECTS. FROM AN AVERAGE OF 640 DAYS IN 2014, THE TIME TAKEN FOR THE CLEARANCE IS NOW DOWN TO 108 DAYS**

**THE NEW TARGET: 70-80 DAYS**

**87%**
CLEARANCE RATE OF PROPOSALS BY THE MoEFCC BETWEEN JULY 2014 AND APRIL 24, 2020. THE MINISTRY APPROVED **2,256** OF THE **2,592** PROPOSALS IT RECEIVED

**ABLAZE** NDRF workers at the site of the Baghjan oilfield fire in Assam

**"Javadekar's job is to protect the environment. His job is not to build roads or ports. That's Nitin Gadkari's job. Javadekar must ensure that Gadkari's projects don't impact the environment adversely"**

**DEBI GOENKA**
*Executive trustee, Conservation Action Trust*

**"The government says the changes in EIA have been brought in response to court judgments over the past decade and driven by the commitment to cut delays in project implementation. By and large, the scheme of things developed in the EIA draft appears sensible"**

**PROMODE KANT**
*Director, Institute of Green Economy*

fee separate from the violation penalty. "The provision for more penalty is a welcome move. The funds accumulated through these penalties could be put to use for protection of the environment," says Vinitaa H. Apte, founder-director, TERRE Policy Centre.

Several other experts, however, point out that with the poor compliance record in India, such encouragement to "regularisation of violations" may result in more accidents such as the LG Polymers gas leak in Visakhapatnam in May and the Baghjan oilfield fire in Assam in June. LG had been operating without valid environment clearance since 2017. Even if the environmental clearance for such a project gets rejected, the damage done to the environment is irreparable. "The notification touches upon ecological damage and economic benefit assessment but they are not interpreted in detail. No such listing and estimation of damage costs and loss of economic benefits has been provided, which leaves it open to being interpreted differently by different people," says Madhu Verma, chief economist, World Resources Institute, a global research organisation.

## The new divisions

The draft notification defines three project categories—A, B1 and B2—based on environmental and geographical impact. The EIA also provides for two kinds of approval—prior environment clearance (EC) with the approval of expert committees and environmental permission/ provision (EP) without their approval. Some of the projects in category B2 don't need EC or EP. Critics allege it is to ensure easy clearance that the draft seeks to move a large variety of projects to the B2 category.

Under Clause 26 of the EIA draft, 40 types of industries/ works such as clay and sand extraction or digging wells or foundations of buildings, solar thermal power plants and common effluent treatment plants have been exempted from prior EC or EP. So are all inland waterways projects and expansion/ widening of national highways. Critics say these exemptions will result in a lack of scrutiny; in 2016, 100 industrial clusters in India were categorised as severely/ critically polluted.

The new draft also exempts any project the government labels 'strategic' from the EIA's purview. Javadekar claims the security agencies will define what is strategic and what is not, but experts are sceptical. "I have no objection to environmental clearance being given to defence projects. National security can't be compromised. But the government must make a distinction between operational structure and non-operational structure while giving blanket clearance," says Debi Goenka, executive trustee, Conservation Action Trust.

The requirement for public consultations has been done away with for several categories such as modernisation of irrigation projects, projects located within notified industrial estates, highway widening, building construction, all projects concerning national defence and security, all linear projects such as roads and pipelines in border areas, and offshore projects located beyond the 12 nautical miles limit. This, according to several experts, takes away from the democratic right of those affected by these projects and dilutes the transparency of the EIA process.

Javadekar claims to have taken away only MSMEs and industries with clean technologies from the realm of public hearing. "The 2006 notification provided exemptions from public hearings for nine categories. We have brought this down to seven. There were 19 sectors which did not require public hearings during the UPA regime. We removed 17 critically polluting industries such as cement, thermal power, steel, paper from this list," he says.

Critics have also questioned the definition of border area—land falling within 100 km aerial distance from the Line of Actual Control with bordering countries of India—as this will cover much of the Northeast, the repository of the country's richest biodiversity.

# HOW BAD IS THE DRAFT EIA 2020?

## The allegations against the hotly debated document and Union environment minister Prakash Javadekar's rebuttals

CRITIQUE: The draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), 2020 dilutes the existing norms formulated in 2006, making it more industry-friendly while ignoring concerns about the environment.
JAVADEKAR: EIA 2020 is just a compilation of 55 amendments to the 2006 EIA notification and the 230 office memorandums issued later to make changes.

C: EIA 2020 provides for 'ex post facto' clearance, allowing projects running without environmental clearance to seek fresh permission and get away with the violation by paying a penalty.
J: The process does not amount to giving ex post facto clearance; provision has been in practice since 2002. The new EIA has increased the scope and quantum of penalty.

C: The Supreme Court has ruled that the concept of "ex post facto environmental clearance" is against the fundamental principles of environmental jurisprudence; so the government has violated the court order
J: In the same order, and on earlier occasions, the SC and high courts invoked the doctrine of proportionality and held that non-compliance on environment clearance cannot lead to closure of an establishment.

C: 40 different types of industries have been exempted from prior environmental clearance.
J: The majority of these exemptions were given during the UPA regime.

C: The new draft exempts any project the government labels 'strategic' from the purview of the EIA. The government will also not disclose any information to the public on such projects. Projects could be categorised 'strategic' to avoid public scrutiny.
J: Security agencies will define what is strategic and what is not.

C: The requirement for public consultations has been done away with for several categories, taking away the democratic right of those affected by these projects and diluting transparency of the EIA process.
J: Only MSMEs and industries with clean technologies have been exempted. The 2006 notification exempted nine categories from public hearings. That has been brought down to seven. There were 19 sectors which did not require public hearings during the UPA regime. Now 17 critically polluting industries such as cement, thermal power, steel, paper have been removed from this list.

C: The notice period for public hearing has been reduced from 30 to 20 days.
J: Nowadays, modes of communication are so fast that 20 days is good enough for this process.

C: Violations can be reported only by the government and the project proponent and not by citizens. How can the violator be expected to report his own violations?
J: Anyone can bring violations to the notice of the government. Action will be taken where required.

C: The 2006 notification mandated that a project compliance report be filed every six months. This has now been extended to once a year, allowing violations to go unscrutinised for a longer period of time and increasing the risk of serious damage to the environment
J: There is nothing wrong in filing the report yearly. The emphasis should be on ensuring that these reports are read and action taken. The government is working towards this.

C: The EIA makes categorical division of A, B1 and B2 industries. Earlier states were given the discretion to make these distinctions.
J: If one state bracketed an industry in category A, another state placed the same industry in category B. This created confusion, so the Centre streamlined it.

C: The ministry's decision to appoint State Environmental Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAA) was against the spirit of cooperative federalism.
J: It's the right of the Centre to nominate members to the SEIAA. For the past three years, several states such as Delhi and Jharkhand have not nominated names for their SEIAA despite repeated reminders. So, the Union government stepped in.

C: The draft excludes construction of buildings of less than 150,000 sq. m.–the size of a stadium–from environmental clearance.
J: The 2006 notification says that the EIA and public hearings are not required for buildings up to 150,000 sq. m. This will be reduced to 50,000 sq. m. now. But green buildings will still not require any EIA clearance.

**HOW GREEN IS...** Union minister Prakash Javadekar

VIKRAM SHARMA

This criticism fails to deter the environment minister's conviction about national security concerns.

The minister also shrugs off the reduction of the notice period for public hearing from 30 days to 20 as a minor issue. "Nowadays, modes of communication are so fast that 20 days is good enough for this process," he says. On the Clause 22 subclause (1) of the draft—that violations can be reported only by the government and the project proponent themselves and not by citizens—he had this to say: "Anyone can bring a violation to the notice of the government. Action will be taken where required."

The 2006 notification mandated that a project compliance report be filed every six months. This has been enlarged to once a year, which again has many experts crying foul. But more than anything else, they demand a more transparent and accountable mechanism in the EIA process. "The EIA is a challenging scientific process that cannot be trivialised. It must be conducted by competent individuals/ agencies with the necessary expertise. There must also be a strict examination of conflict of interest between the individual/ agency conducting the EIA and the project proponent," says Prof. Renee M. Borges, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science.

## The powerless states

The EIA 2020 draft has also drawn criticism for "denying" the states discretionary powers. For instance, unlike in the past, the EIA makes categorical division of A, B1 and B2 industries. Earlier, states were given the discretion to make those distinctions. "If one state bracketed an industry in category A, another state placed the same industry in category B. That created confusion, so we streamlined the division," says Javadekar.

But there was no confusion in the mind of Ramesh when he termed the environment ministry's decision to appoint State Environmental Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAA) as "yet another nail in the coffin of cooperative federalism". Javadekar blames it on the indecisive nature of some states. "It's the right of the Centre to nominate members to the SEIAA. For the past three years, several states such as Delhi and Jharkhand have not nominated names to their SEIAA, despite repeated reminders. So we stepped in," he says.

Despite Javadekar's counters, conservationists are not enthused by the Modi government's stated objective—speeding up clearance of files in the green ministry. In fact, there has been a growing clamour for the need to not see economic development and environmental protection as trade-offs. Over 60 per cent of the global GDP is dependent on natural resources, the reason why the World Economic Forum recently said that climate change and biodiversity loss are the two of the biggest threats to business and industry. Lamenting the decline in India's natural capital between 1992 and 2014, Kumar says the authorities must take serious note of this to reverse the trend: "An effective EIA can ensure this, which in turn will help industry and business."

Javadekar agrees that protecting the environment and ensuring sustainable growth are essential. "We are among the few countries who have been walking the talk on the Paris agreement. We promised 35 per cent reduction of emission intensity by 2030, and we have already achieved 21 per cent. We have added 15,000 sq. km to our forest cover. We have also taken up a target of restoring 26 million hectares of degraded land," he claims. If true, these are commendable achievements. But there is no place for complacency for the government in a country which is among the worst 15 in the world when it comes to meeting environmental goals. ■

**with inputs from Rahul Noronha**

SOMNATH SEN

**RAVAGED** The Khelari coal mines of Central Coalfields Ltd, Dhanbad

**"The EIA has nothing new. It's a regularisation of various processes that have been going on through amendments and official orders since 2006. The credit and blame for this new notification have to be shared by all governments"**

**VINITAA H. APTE**
*Founder director, TERRE Policy Centre*

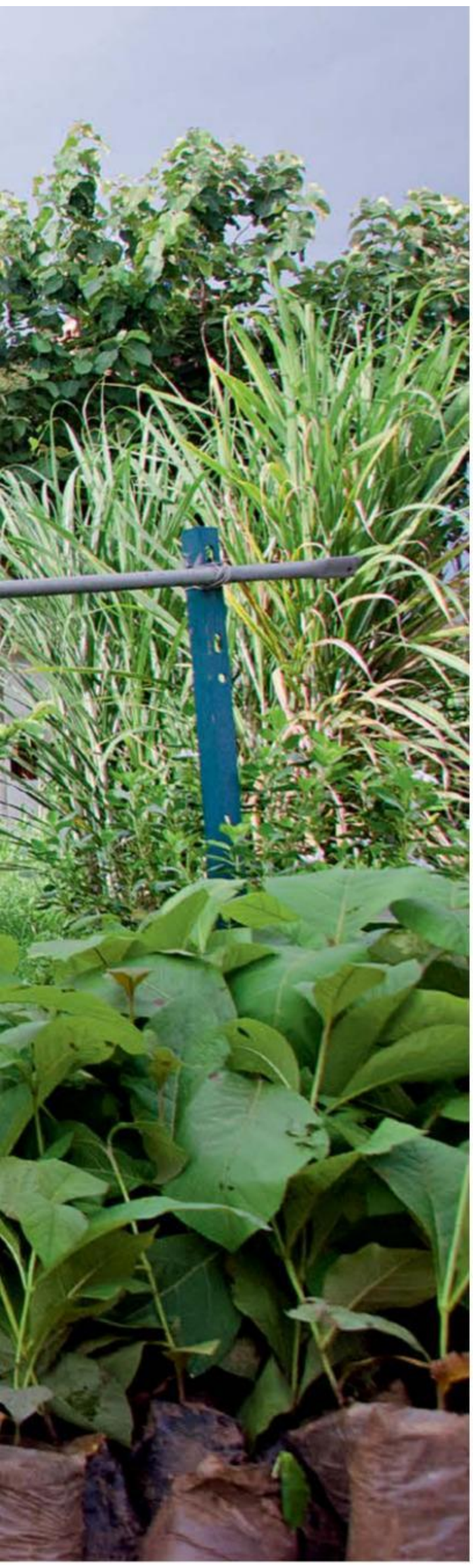
**"The EIA is a challenging scientific process that cannot be trivialised. It must be conducted by competent individuals/ agencies. There must also be no conflict of interest between the individuals/ agency conducting the EIA and the project proponent"**

**PROF. RENEE M. BORGES**
*Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science*

# BHARAT LEADS THE WAY

A FEW ECONOMIC INDICATORS, SUCH AS TRACTOR SALES, RURAL UNEMPLOYMENT NUMBERS AND FMCG SALES, SUGGEST THAT INDIA'S RURAL AREAS ARE SEEING AN ECONOMIC UPTICK. IS A REVIVAL UNDER WAY?

**BY SHWWETA PUNJ**



ASHOK PRIYADARSHI

**SWEET RELIEF**
Sadanand Kumar, 44, a farmer from Nawada, Bihar, says he has received financial support from the state government since the lockdown lifted

Six months after Covid-19 hit India, there is a sliver of good news from the rural hinterland. Some economic indicators suggest a bounceback may be in progress. Fertiliser sales jumped 83 per cent in April-June to a record 111.61 lakh tonnes despite the nationwide lockdown. This time around, the all-India planting area of paddy, at 22.02 million hectares, was higher by 17.3 per cent on year, as on July 24. Most of the farmers in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are dependent on rice for their income. Sowing is up nearly 39 per cent. Tractor and two-wheeler sales are approaching levels of the previous year. Daily tractor registrations are close to 90 per cent of FY20's daily average. Total tractor sales (domestic plus exports) during July 2020 were at 25,402 units, up 27 per cent from 19,992 units for the same period last year. Two-wheeler sales also suggest a rebound—Bajaj Auto sold 146,695 motorcycles this June, 73.5 per cent of the 199,340 units sold in the same month in 2019. However, Hero MotoCorp, the world's largest two-wheeler manufacturer, sold 514,509 units of motorcycles and scooters in July 2020—a decline of 3.97 per cent as compared to July 2019—suggesting that the growth in June was a combination of pent-up demand and the need for personal mobility solutions.

Ashish Kale, president of the Federation of Automobile Dealers Association, says there has been a genuine improvement in sentiment because a number of positive factors have come together in rural India. "The rains have been good, the central government is investing, sowing has been excellent and migrant labour has returned to work in the fields," he says. While some of the sales can be ascribed to pent-up demand, they are also being driven by a combination of available cash and existing need, he adds. Yet, the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers predicts a 26-45 per cent slide in sales this year. According to Kale, automotive dealers in rural areas are facing a supply crunch—some models of two-wheelers are in short supply. A potentially positive note is that the increasing sales in this category are despite a lack of available financing—with the spread of the coronavirus, more people are investing in their own means of transport.

However, experts caution that a prosperous agri sector does not necessarily indicate a recovery of the rural economy. "Non-agri activities [account for] two-thirds of rural incomes," points out Arun Singh, chief economist at Dun & Bradstreet India. The rural sector's contribution to India's overall manufacturing and construction output is about 50 per cent. "Unless manufacturing and construction revive, the rural economy will remain subdued," he warns. A recent report by Neelkanth Mishra, managing director, India strategist and co-head of equity strategy for Asia Pacific at Credit Suisse, also warns that the rapid spread of Covid-19 to Tier 3 and 4 cities could stall this growth.

## ROBUST SALES GROWTH

Meanwhile, leading FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) players such as Dabur, Parle Agro, Marico, Godrej and ITC have reported robust sales in rural and semi-urban markets. "For Dabur, the rural market has been growing [faster than] the urban market. This was the case all of last year and remains so [this year]," says Dabur India chief executive officer Mohit Malhotra. "We are planning to expand our rural footprint from 52,000 villages in March 2020 to 60,000 villages by 2020-21," he says. Dabur is also looking to expand its product basket with affordable packs across categories to push demand growth. An analysis by Nielsen shows increasing consumption levels—though 60 per cent

of the households it polled said Covid-19 had hit their income, 39 per cent said they were spending more on household goods.

The return of workers to the market is visible in the improved employment rate. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, rural unemployment fell from 24.37 per cent on April 12 to 7.62 per cent on June 28. Urban unemployment also fell, from 23.17 per cent on April 12 to 10.69 per cent on June 28. "Bharat is doing better than urban India," says Nilesh Shah, managing director, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management. "I wouldn't be surprised if the growth of agriculture in 2020-21 is positive. We have seen growth in GST collections, from Rs 32,000 crore in April to Rs 91,000 crore in June—the economy is trying to recover."

Together, indicators like these suggest that India's rural economy, which makes up 46 per cent of the national income, could take up some of the economic slack from Covid. Rural India is home to more than 67 per cent of the country's consumer base but accounts for only 36 per cent of the FMCG sector's overall sales. Analysts predict that with migrant labour back in their home-towns and a slew of policy interventions targeted at generating income and employment in rural areas, there will be increased demand for FMCG products in these areas. Businesses are accordingly expanding their rural footprint. Nadia Chauhan, joint managing director and chief marketing officer at Parle Agro, says, "While we were initially impacted by the sudden lockdown, [sales] have now touched 100 per cent of last year's base for the same month. The [share] of rural areas has increased from 41 per cent in 2019 to 46 per cent in 2020."

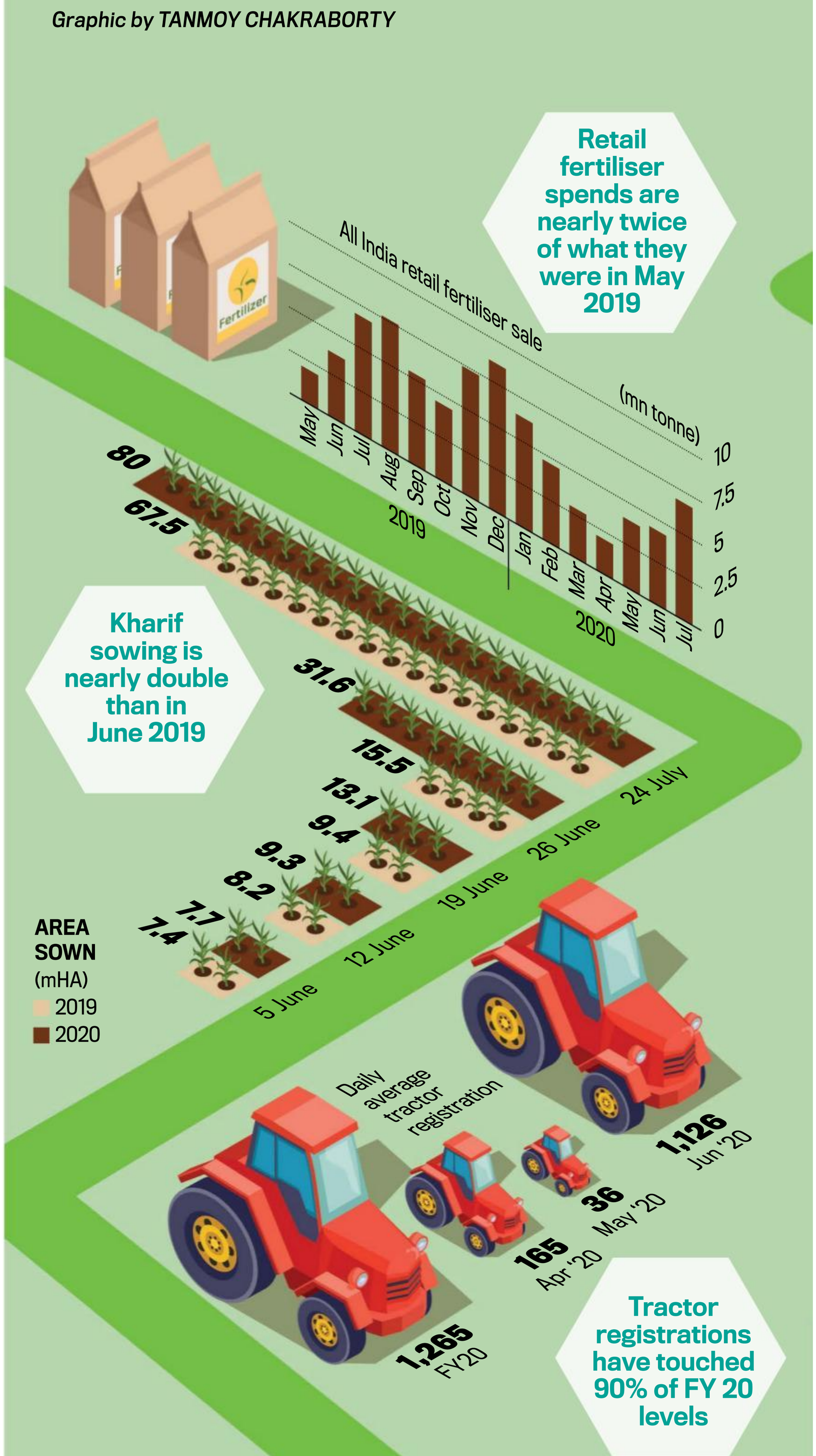
## THE RURAL GLOW

Agriculture and allied activities could be the Indian economy's only bright spot this year, as the pandemic has slammed the brakes on industry and services. Agriculture includes a number of sub-sectors, including foodgrains, livestock products like meat, milk and eggs as well as fishing

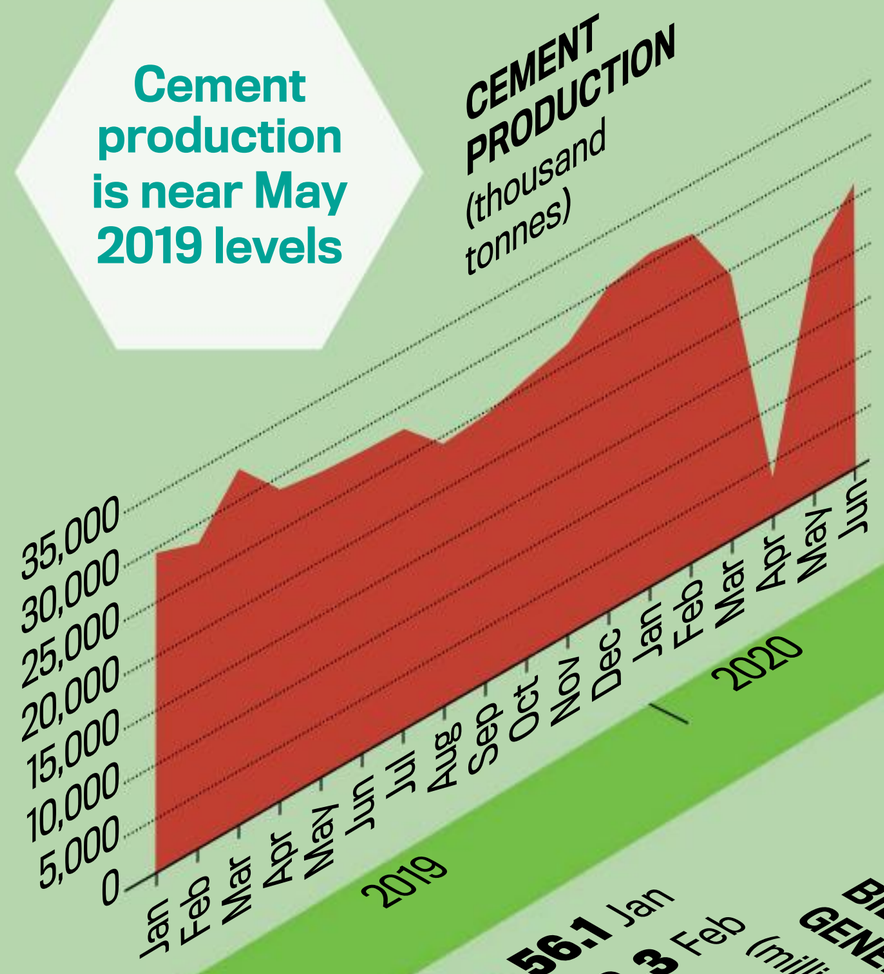
# NUMBERS OF HOPE

## INDICATORS IN RURAL INDIA THAT COULD HERALD THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC REVIVAL

*Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY*



**Cement production is near May 2019 levels**



**15%**

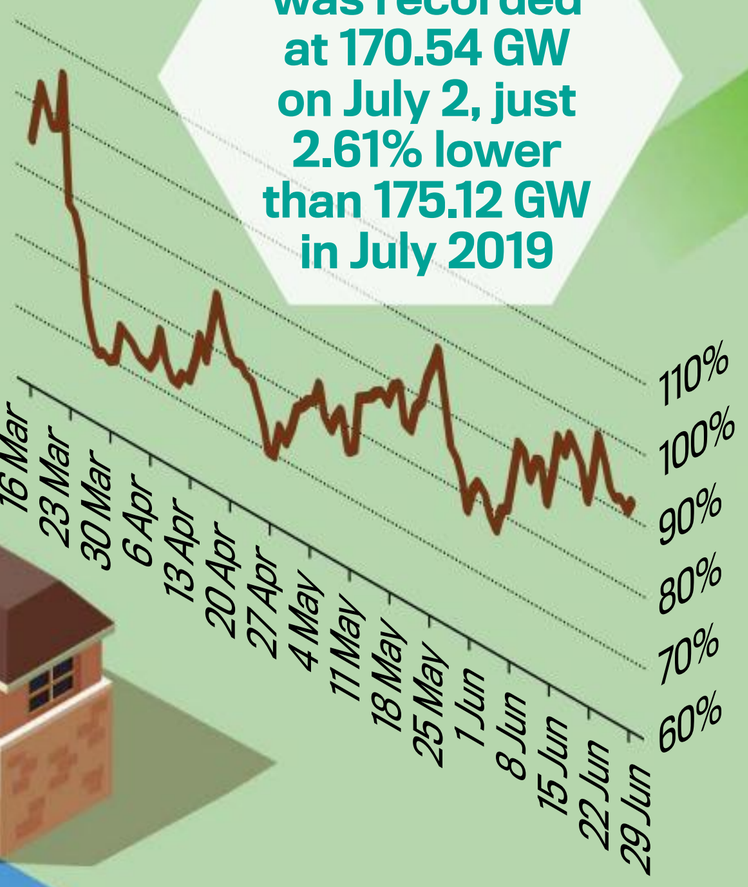
**above normal rainfall experienced by India in June according to the IMD, fuelling hope for rural India**

**June's e-way bills are close to pre-Covid collections**

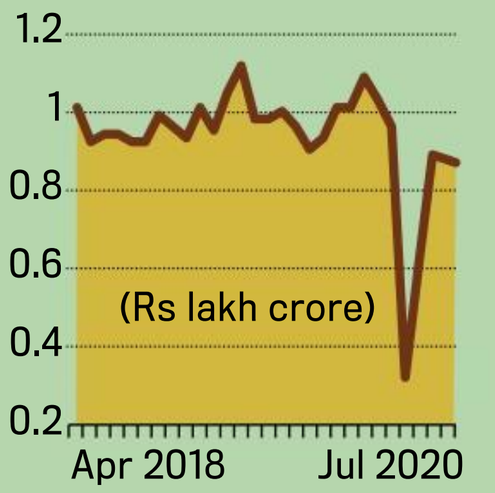
**Agricultural GDP to increase by over Rs 3 lakh crore in FY20E and FY21E**

**Electronic toll collections have risen**

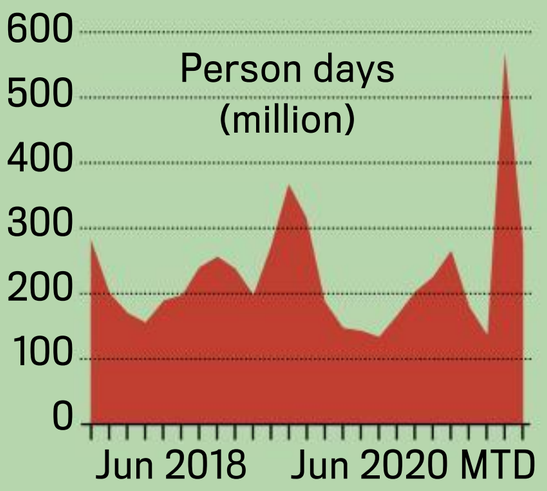
**Peak power demand met was recorded at 170.54 GW on July 2, just 2.61% lower than 175.12 GW in July 2019**



**GST collections have risen**




**June MNREGA employment already close to Feb level**




*Sources: Kotak Mutual Fund Monthly Outlook Report, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy*

and aquaculture. Foodgrains are the largest component, though livestock also plays a crucial role in driving agricultural GVA (gross value added) growth. Foodgrain and milk production are expected to do well this year, though meat, eggs, fishing and aquaculture may remain depressed. As of 2018, the share of agriculture in India's GDP had declined to 14 per cent, though over half the country's population is dependent on it.

Driving the optimism is a bumper rabi crop, a massive procurement drive by the government and concerted policy interventions to put more money in the hands of the rural poor. The latter include the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme, under which farmers receive Rs 6,000 per year, and an increased focus on MNREGA. According to the Union ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution, the government's wheat procurement this year set an all-time record of 38.2 million tonnes as on June 16. In all, 4.2 million farmers benefitted, with Rs 73,500 crore paid as minimum support price for wheat. D.K. Joshi, chief economist with Crisil, predicts a 2.5 per cent growth in this sector. "This is unlike the situation in previous recessions, where agriculture [suffered]."

In Rajasthan's Sherpur village, nearly every household has at least one MNREGA cardholder, employed in digging or construction work from 7 am to 1.30 pm and earning about Rs 4,500 per month. Across India, 130 million workers have benefitted from the job scheme, which has emerged as a last resort not only for unskilled workers but also for many educated and highly skilled workers who have lost their jobs thanks to the pandemic. The increase of Rs 40,000 crore to the budget allocation for MNREGA, announced by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman under the Rs 20 lakh crore Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, takes the total allocation to over Rs 1 lakh crore. "In rural India, there are two gods—one is the god above, and the other is the government," says Pradeep Kashyap, founder of MART Global Management Solutions, a major player in the rural marketing sector. "This time, farmers believe that god has been kind and that god will continue to be kind. It's a rare run." Credit Suisse's Mishra also points out that a low virus case-load drove a rapid revival in non-agri activities. And while the 39 per cent year-on-year growth in MNREGA person days shows good fiscal support, the fact that workers are taking up work at Rs 200 a day shows a shortage of good jobs.

**The government says it disbursed Rs 73,500 crore as minimum support price payments for wheat**

Economists and experts also say agriculture reform measures in the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan stand out. The proposed new law, which allows farmers to choose who they want to sell their produce to rather than remaining captive to the APMC (Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee) markets, was long overdue. Over the years, these markets had left them vulnerable to price manipulation by traders and commission agents. An analysis by Crisil notes that the amendment to the Essential Commodities Act to deregulate food items is aimed at improving price realisation for farmers. According to a survey of 230 farmers conducted by MART Global between June 13-15, 63 per cent of respondents said they found the income support under PM-KISAN to be helpful, 40 per cent said the ability to sell their produce to any buyer was helpful, and 27 per cent said they were helped by the abolition of the mandi tax.

Other major changes are also afoot in rural India. The country recently emerged as the world's largest producer of milk, while India's horticulture output surpassed grain production in 2019, the first time ever—310 million tonnes of horticultural produce against 290 million tonnes of foodgrains. This will also have a positive effect on incomes, as prices for horticultural produce tend to be higher than for cereals. (A kilo of wheat costs Rs 16-18, while a kilo of mangoes costs a minimum of Rs 50.) Another factor fostering positive sentiment is the setting up of an agriculture infrastructure fund with a corpus of Rs 1 lakh crore. This will be used to provide financial support to agriculture entrepreneurs and to develop logistics facilities for farmers.

### THAT BEING SAID...

There are also caveats to the prospects for agricultural growth. The locust attack in India around the beginning of 2020 has severely affected crops in Rajasthan. The kharif season is looking bleak. Other environmental factors have also played a big role—for instance, states like West Bengal and Odisha were severely impacted by super cyclone Amphan in May, and millions of Assam's citizens were affected by the recent flooding in the state.

Many ask if the optimism on the rural front could be a stepping stone for India's economic revival in the post-Covid phase. While a comprehensive recovery is still a long way off—and will require much more—the current optimism is certainly something the Centre and states can build on, if only to turn the page on the gloomy economic narrative caused by the pandemic. ■

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PANDIT JASRAJ 1930-2020

# The Mesmeriser

Pandit Jasraj was a favourite with audiences at concerts and music festivals but his most enduring contribution may have been to pull *khyal* away from the markers associated with *gharana*

**By Partho Datta**

Attending a concert by Jasraj was always an experience to savour. Convention dictated that the *doyen* of Hindustani vocalists command the prime slot, which was usually late in the evening after other musicians had concluded. As the buzz grew, the audience profile changed with a rush of younger people filling the auditorium. Jasraj appeared on stage in flamboyant silks—lately in bright and orange hues. Hugging a *swarmandal*, he always began with a trademark prayer, *Mangalam Bhagwan Vishnu*, invoking a devotional hush among the audience before transiting effortlessly to exploring a raga.

One never stopped marvelling at Jasraj's melodic range and the mesmeric quality of his voice—which became more resonant as he grew older. Hindustani ragas usually span one and a half octaves; Jasraj traversed three, holding notes in the difficult lower octave with ease, stunning the audience with his breath control. Over the years, critics grew wary but the audience loved it and revelled in his vocal prowess.

Jasraj always ended with a *bhajan*, avoiding genres like *thumri* and *dadra*. The request from the adoring crowd was usually *Om Namo Bhagwate* or *Mata Kalika*, rendered with his characteristic gusto. In later years, his students joined in a chorus providing support and harmony. His real contribution, however, was in mainstream *khyal*.

**Hindustani ragas usually span one and a half octaves; Jasraj traversed three, holding notes in the difficult lower octave, stunning the audience with his breath control**

Jasraj helped to make *khyal* generic, pulling it away from the markers associated with *gharana*. The attributes of this form of raga music was a new kind of voice—mellifluous, soothing and attractive. It was suited to modern auditoriums, sound systems, stereo and recording. This music embraced a sonic range and knowledge of raga grammar was no longer requisite as first-time listeners immersed themselves in an aural experience, enthusiastically expanding a growing public for classical music. Jasraj adapted to new trends as did others, notably Kishori Amonkar, Parveen Sultana and Rajan and Sajan Mishra. Rashid Khan followed in their footsteps. In the 1970s, Jasraj had to contend with distinctive contemporaries like Bhimsen Joshi and Kumar Gandharva and it was not unusual for all three to sing in the same music festivals.

Jasraj's training had been mostly in-house from his two elder brothers, Mani Ram and Pratap Narayan. Their father, a vocalist, had learnt the style of the little-known Mewati *gharana*, which owed its origins to vocalist Ghagge Nazir Khan, a court musician in Jodhpur and Bhopal. Young Jasraj first trained in tabla, but he chafed at the contempt that instrumental accompanists faced at the hands of soloists. Determined to succeed as a vocalist, he began his career singing duets with his eldest brother Mani Ram. In a Doordarshan interview (now available on YouTube) that Vinaychandra Maudgalya did with Mani Ram and Jasraj, it becomes clear that the Mewati style prided itself on its traditionalism and rejected the modern systematisation of ragas invented by Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande in the early twentieth century.

Jasraj settled in Bombay and by the early 1970s had emerged as a concert favourite, together with peers like Amjad Ali Khan, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Shivkumar Sharma and Zakir Hussain. This was a generation that came after Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar and Vilayat Khan. In vocal music it was difficult to avoid the influence of elders like Amir Khan, and Jasraj, like many contemporaries, was profoundly influenced by his contemplative style. This is evident in recordings of ragas like Bilaskhani Todi and Darbari.

At the same time, he persisted in showcasing complex ragas from his earlier training, such as Shuddha Nat, Barari, Hussaini Kanada and Khamaj Bahar. In his later years, he delighted audiences with his soulful renderings of Dev Gandhar, Jaijaiwanti and perennial favourites like Bihag. His recordings of ragas Nat Narayani and Asa, which are mentioned in the Granth Sahib, were much appreciated. A remarkable early album was Surdas *padas* rendered in the *haveli* style.

Jasraj married legendary filmmaker V. Shantaram's daughter Madhura. His children Sharangdev and Durga are composers and television personalities. Senior disciples include scholar Mukund Lath, Som Tewari, Girish Wazalwar and Chandrasekhar Swami. Sanjeev Abhyankar, Shweta Jhaveri and Kala Ramnath the violinist are among his accomplished younger students who represent his musical values and sparkling legacy best. ■

**Partho Datta** *teaches at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharal Nehru University, New Delhi*

*Photograph by* **BANDEEP SINGH**

# MIND MAKETH THE MAN

## EVEN MORE THAN HIS GIFTS IN FRONT OF THE STUMPS AND BEHIND IT, IT WAS HIS PRESCIENT READING OF THE GAME THAT SET MSD APART

*By* **Boria Majumdar**

**CAPTAIN COOL**
Dhoni setting the field during the India-Australia quarter-final of the 2011 World Cup, at Motera, Ahmedabad

INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/GETTY IMAGES

This was the T20 World Cup final, 2007. When Misbah-ul-Haq hit a towering straight six off Joginder Sharma in the second ball of the last over, Pakistan looked nearly home. Six needed of fours balls. On air, Ravi Shastri said: 'Pakistan are just a hit away from becoming world champions.' Co-commentator Ramiz Raja was gushing about Misbah and could barely restrain his excitement. Shastri had already asked if Dhoni should have gone for Harbhajan (Singh) instead to bowl that last over, for casting the inexperienced Joginder in that role seemed to fly in the face of cricketing logic. Joginder's first ball, a 10 feet wide, only added to the alarm. Dhoni ran up to his charge, for a third time in the over, whispered into his ears and returned behind the stumps. The next ball was bowled full on the middle stump. Misbah scooped it into the gleeful hands of Sreesanth at short fine leg. The stadium erupted, India erupted, and the legend of visionary captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, already a much-adored national hero, was born.

The seemingly prescient throw of the dice in the 2007 final was no fluke. Over the years, MSD did it again and again. In many close encounters. Cut to the 2011 World Cup final. Much to everyone's surprise, MSD promoted himself in the batting order, ahead of in-form Yuvraj Singh and Suresh Raina—and took India home, this time as batsman, in another well-remembered knock, including a match-winning six that Sunil Gavaskar rhapsodises is the last thing he'd like to see before he dies. As coach Gary Kirsten said, "It was his call. And it showed how he was as leader and captain."

A third memory, not so firmly etched in the public imagination, is how Dhoni turned the tide in the 2013 Champions Trophy final against England in Birmingham. Defending a modest 129 off 20 overs in a rain-curtailed game, Dhoni was fast running out of options, with Eoin Morgan and Ravi Bopara on a roll. That's when he turned, counter-intuitively for many experts, to Ishant Sharma, who had been singled out for harsh treatment by the English. Sitting in the Edgbaston press box, we agreed it was a huge gamble: one more bad over, and it would have been curtains for India. But. To everyone's surprise, Sharma picked two wickets in two balls, and all of a sudden, India had a chance. In another inspired tactical move, Dhoni got the spinners Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin to bowl overs 19 and 20, teasing the English batsman, far more comfortable against pace, to slog and perish. It worked, and gave MSD the only missing piece of ICC silverware for himself and India.

"He is the calmest on the field," says Dave Warner. Tendulkar, too, picks that quality of being unflappable under pressure as Dhoni's defining attribute: "Being calm is what helped him take key decisions." Mithali Raj, captain of the women's national ODI team and one of the legends of the women's game, qualifies the apparent calm: "As a captain, you do feel pressure, but with Dhoni, it is as if he doesn't. Even if he does, he is able to absorb it and not show it."

That calm demeanour on the cricket field is so universally accepted and so talked about that it's become an underexamined cliché among fans. The reason why that cricketing brain processes dynamic, on-field information well is that his calm reduces clutter, which leads to clarity of thinking. This was in telling evidence in the concluding over of the humdinger against Bangladesh in the World T20 in 2016, a match India managed to pull back from the jaws of defeat. With two to get of the last ball, it was a given that the Bangladesh batsmen would run for everything. By the time that last ball missed the bat and sailed into Dhoni's gloves, the non-striker had already taken off. "In that situation, the first instinct is to throw the ball", says Jhulan Goswami, another former India captain. "You aim and throw, hoping to hit [the stumps]." But Dhoni, a powerful runner, quickly wagered in his mind that he could beat the non-striker and darted off towards the stumps. He did get there first, to take India through yet again. Recalling the drama of that last ball on India Today TV, for the chat show *Inspiration*, Hardik Pandya said: "When Mahibhai started running, I just shut my eyes. I knew he'd get there, it was Mahibhai,

BANDEEP SINGH

**"The world has seen his achievements. I have seen the man. He is a very special person"**

–VIRAT KOHLI

**"ONE OF THE CALMEST MEN I'VE COME ACROSS ON THE CRICKET FIELD. THAT COOL DEMEANOUR WAS THE KEY TO HIS TREMENDOUS SUCCESS OVER A GLITTERING CAREER"**

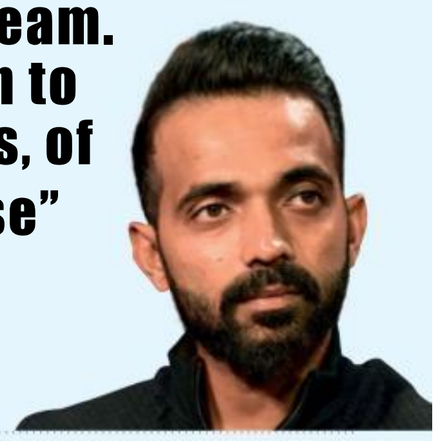
–DAVID WARNER

*"The biggest attributes of a successful captain are a sharp mind and the ability to remain composed under pressure. M.S. Dhoni possessed these attributes more than anyone I know. He has given Indian cricket some of its best moments and that will be the enduring legacy of his outstanding career"*

*–MITHALI RAJ*

**"The way he reads the game is special. It was a lesson for all of us in the team. His contribution to Indian cricket is, of course, immense"**

–AJINKYA RAHANE



**"As a player, when you make a mistake on the field, you inevitably look at your captain. A show of anger or frustration [from the captain] can be really deflating when you're in the dumps. That's where M.S. Dhoni was different–and special"**

*–JHULAN GOSWAMI*

BANDEEP SINGH

"If I have to die, I'll say, please, let me watch the six Dhoni hit to win India the World Cup. It'll surely bring a smile to my face and I'll go in peace. I told him as much"

–SUNIL GAVASKAR

*"His humility is what makes him different. Having shared the dressing room with him for years, I can tell you he is someone you want to spend time with and learn from. You can never ever forget his contribution to Indian cricket–a real legend of the game"*

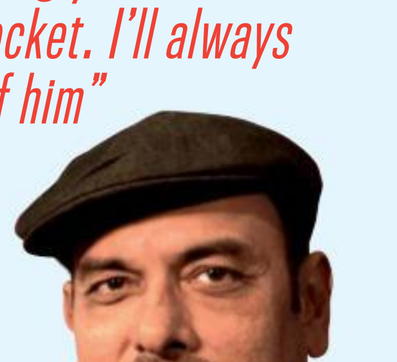
*–BHARAT ARUN*

**"There are many things about him that stand out but if you ask me to pick one quality, I'll say his calm mind. The ability to stay cool under pressure allowed for clarity of thinking and helped him win important tournaments. The six he hit to win India the World Cup may remain the most important shot he played, but the one I vividly remember is a pull shot for six off Shoaib Akhtar in 2006. I was at the non-striker's end and that shot against Shoaib, who was bowling fast, was for me a perfect snapshot of the kind of talent Dhoni had"**

**— SACHIN TENDULKAR**

*"You have to count him among the greatest–mind, among the 'greatest', not just greats. Coming from where he did, that makes it even more special. From his days in Kharagpur to his days as an Indian cricketer, he was always in the moment. In retirement too–he has moved on. His achievements straddle all formats: he's won the T20 and ODI World Cups and multiple IPL titles. In Test cricket, he took India to #1 in the world. As a wicket-keeper, he was not a natural but had blindingly fast hands, faster than any pickpocket. I'll always have fond memories of him"*

*–RAVI SHASTRI*



**IT'S A SIX**
Dhoni hits the winning runs in the 2011 World Cup final between India and Sri Lanka

GRAHAM CROUCH/GETTY IMAGES

but the tension was too much.... There can never be another M.S. Dhoni."

The ability to think on his feet and soak up pressure in tight situations served him well as a leader. Almost irrespective of the match situation, Dhoni looked in control; in fact he looked a step ahead of the competition. Rarely did Dhoni react when a catch was dropped, a terrible ball bowled, an indiscreet shot played. "Those things make a huge difference. When you bungle, you're already feeling bad. If the captain is calm, it soothes your nerves," says Ajinkya Rahane, a regular in the national side and among the best readers of the modern game.

A senior academic at IIM Calcutta says M.S. Dhoni is a favourite B-school case study. "Who decodes that mind better can break a deadlock between two candidates in an interview," he says. MSD's modest early life is too well-storied to bear repetition, but it's worth reminding ourselves that it was he who really gave wings to the cricketing aspirations of small-town India (he comes from Ranchi in Jharkhand); it was Dhoni more than anyone else who gave underprivileged aspirants in India the hope that perhaps they could do it too. In putting Ranchi on India's cricket map, Dhoni nurtured dreams and changed Indian cricket forever. It's an interesting coincidence that India's first World Cup-winning skipper, Kapil Dev, also came from a cricketing backwaters of his time. In 1983, when India won the first World Cup, Chandigarh had no cricket pedigree; it was not the fancied cricket destination of today.

MSD was far from perfect, though. He was not as naturally gifted as Tendulkar or as resilient as Gavaskar or as flamboyant as Kapil Dev. Nor was he a stylist with the bat—he was no David Gower or V.V.S. Laxman or Mohammed Azharuddin, whose batting grace people love to wax lyrical about. Nor was he a natural behind the stumps. But he made up for the lack of those gifts in ways that others can only envy. On the field, as captain, keeper and batsman, especially in the white ball game, he was matchless. And if you'll measure him simply by his success, then try and beat his three biggest trophies—the World T20 (2007), the ODI World Cup (2011) and the ICC Champions Trophy (2013)—not to forget, India's ascent, under his leadership to the #1 position in the ICC Test rankings.

That record, by itself, speaks volumes for why Mahendra Singh Dhoni has earned for himself a permanent place among the pantheon of cricketing greats. If you ask Ravi Shastri, he'll tell you that he counts him among the greatest ever. But even beyond the gifts of mind and body or leadership, the man stands for, and is driven by, a certain process-based work ethic without overinvesting himself in the end result. That brings a lightness of spirit to his adventures on the field and lights up the smile that cricket aficionados and fans the world over will remember for a long, long time. ■

# WHAT YOU DON'T SEE WHEN YOU SEE DHONI

## Everyone in cricket has an M.S. Dhoni selfie, but nobody has his number, so to speak

*By* **Anand Vasu**

When he burst onto the scene, Dhoni was a complete unknown, in more ways than one. He was different from anything one might have expected. The long, straightened hair was not a cultivated look but the meaty hitting of a cricket ball with violent power was cultivated. The halting, idiosyncratic English was not aspirational but making a life in cricket was a clearly articulated ambition, to be followed through, come what may. From unknown in 2004 to unknowable in 2020, Dhoni's international career has played out under intense scrutiny for more than a decade and a half, and when he walked away from the game, whistling a tune to himself, the greybeard left everyone scratching their heads, trying to make sense of what they had witnessed.

Back in 2006 after his first full season as an international cricketer, I sat Dhoni down for an interview. More accurately, Dhoni sat me down for an interview. Those were the days when Dhoni still believed in giving interviews. He was already making a name for himself as a cricketing hermit. Telephones distressed him and he actively distrusted reporters and the role they played in a cricketer's life. While Dhoni did have a mobile phone and would even hand out the number, he never answered it. In hotels, the reception would have instructions to mark his room landline as 'Do Not Disturb'; if they failed to do so, the receiver would be off the hook.

There are many famous stories, including assorted apocrypha, of Dhoni's relationship with telephones. One happened when N. Srinivasan was secretary of the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) and by that token the convenor of the selection committee. Hard as he tried, Srinivasan just couldn't get hold of Dhoni to ascertain his availability for a future meeting. Communication was re-established when the two were face to face again, but it is not clear how that came about. Then there was the time Amitabh Bachchan was attempting to get hold of Dhoni to congratulate him for something or the other, only to find his calls and messages ignored. The actor everyone seems to want a piece of then took to Twitter to convey his greetings. Which also went unacknowledged.

For a time, it was said Dhoni had the world's most expensive pager, because that was how he used his mobile phone. You did not call Dhoni, he called you. But this was not out of disrespect but an instinct to protect himself and his time. In that early interview, it became clear that Dhoni knew his mind. When

# THE ONLY ONE ★★★

## A statistical portrait of a superachiever

RITAM BANERJEE/GETTY IMAGES

» Dhoni is the only captain to win a **T20 World Cup (2007),** an **ODI World Cup (2011)** and an **ICC Champions Trophy (2013)**; his captaincy in 332 matches across formats is the highest by anyone

» Only player to lead his team in 50+ matches in all formats

**60** Tests
**200** ODIs
**72** T20Is

» Only captain to average

Over **30** in T20Is (min. 500 runs)

**40** in Tests (min, 1,000 runs) and **50** in ODIs (min. 1,000 runs)

As captain, he averaged...
**37.1** in T20Is
**40.6** in Tests
**53.9** in ODIs

### ODIs

» Dhoni averages **50.6 in ODIs** and is one of only **two batsmen to average 50+ and score 10,000 runs**; Kohli is the other; Tendulkar comes closest at **44.8**

» Dhoni has hit **229 sixes** in ODIs, second only to Rohit Sharma. Of these, 9 sixes were to finish games, more than any other batsman

» Dhoni has hit **7 centuries at No. 5 or lower**—joint highest with Yuvraj Singh and Jos Buttler

» Dhoni has been **unbeaten in 84 ODIs**—the most by any player—51 in chases, of which 47 resulted in India wins

» The **183 vs Sri Lanka in 2005** is the highest by a designated keeper; it's also the joint second highest score by anyone in a run chase

» Dhoni's **444 dismissals is 3rd all-time**, behind Kumar Sangakkara (482) and Adam Gilchrist (472); of these **123 were stumpings**—no other wicketkeeper has 100 stumpings

» Only Ricky Ponting (265) and Stephen Fleming (218) have been captain in more ODIs than **Dhoni's 200**

the stripling was asked if he had spoken to the likes of Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid on dealing with his newfound fame, he said: "I haven't had a chat with them specifically about this. But I've learnt from them, by watching them. How they interact with each other, how they interact with the media ... I've made one thing clear. I don't want to get into controversies. If I don't want to speak about something, I won't."

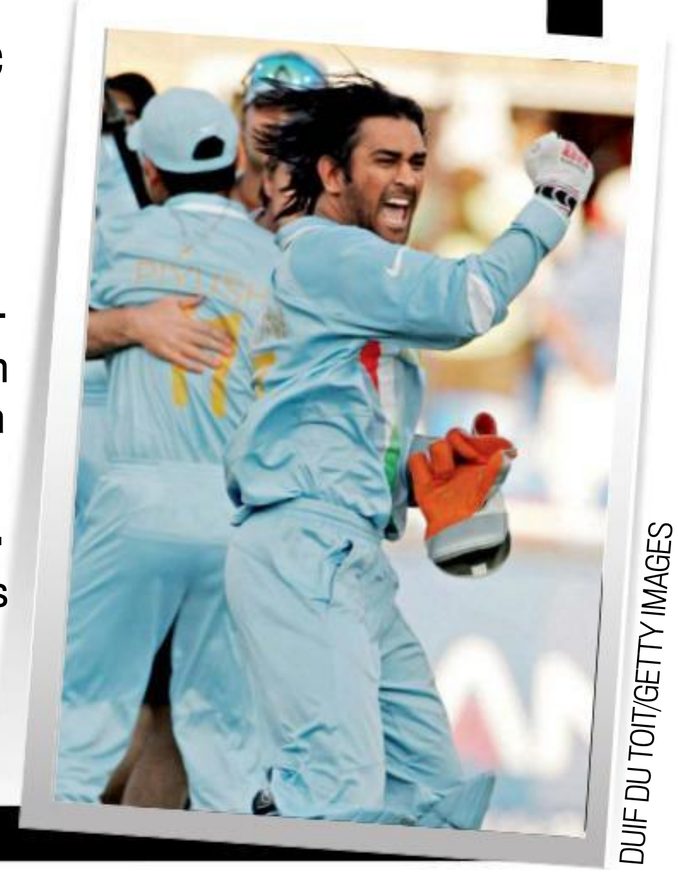
He did learn from his seniors in the team, but Dhoni did not copy. The first thing he did when he was established was to cut out everything extraneous to his cricket. Gone were the interviews, and press conferences were limited to what was compulsory. Even in those pressers, there were questions he simply would not address. Most importantly, the team bubble was sealed. The leaking of stories about each other stopped and discussions on selection stayed confidential. Dhoni's men were given a simple brief: play cricket, stay true to your team and to hell with the rest.

This is not to say that Dhoni was rude or standoffish—far from it. When he met you, at a cricket ground or an event or an airport lounge, he would be the first to disarm with a wisecrack. Which is why everyone has a Dhoni story, even if they cannot claim to be part of the Dhoni story. It was while waiting for a delayed flight that we had one of our longer interactions, in which Dhoni laughed when it was put to him that he now had the baton from the leading lights, and it was up to him to run with it. "If you think I'm going to have a 15-year career like Sachin or Rahul, and play a hundred Tests and all that, you are in for a surprise. I'm just here to play cricket. When that goes, I'm gone. You won't hear from me again."

- Dhoni has been **captain and wicket-keeper in 200 ODIs.** The next closest is Pakistan's Sarfaraz Ahmed with 50
- Dhoni's **average of 53.5** as wicket-keeper-captain is second only to AB de Villiers' 71.4, but AB did so over 30 ODIs to Dhoni's 200
- In 108 chases of 300 or less, **Dhoni averaged 60.5**, with 29 scores of 50 or more and was not out 46 times
- Dhoni is the **greatest finisher** in ODI cricket. In successful chases, he **averages 102.7 across 116 matches.** The next best is Kohli, who averages 86.2 in 89 successful chases. Michael Bevan averaged 86.2 in 75 similar instances

## T20I

- Dhoni has **led India in all six ICC World T20 competitions** (now called Twenty20 World Cup). No other captain of a full member country has led in more than three such events
- Dhoni has **91 dismissals** (57 catches and 34 stumpings) in T20Is—both are records



DUIF DU TOIT/GETTY IMAGES

NATHAN STIRK/GETTY IMAGES

That, of course, has turned out to be anything but true.

Which brings us to another of Dhoni's strengths—his adaptability. At the end of his career, it is almost forgotten that he came to the world of cricket as a monstrous striker of the ball. Here was a batsman who could clear the ropes at will, with a combination of brute strength and shot selection not seen in Indian cricket. When he was swinging for the fences as a youngster, it seemed that he was a carefree batsman, a sort of daredevil, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Dhoni was, in fact, among the more risk-averse cricketers to be successful across formats over an extended period. In limited overs cricket, it was his ability to assess risk, without fearing the consequences of failing, that enabled him to transition from being a charismatic slogger into a fearsome batsman who controlled the tempo of an innings from start to finish.

Psychologists will offer a simple example of how the human mind deals with this. Walking a one foot wide path marked on solid ground is child's play. The same task on a plank balanced between two chairs, three feet off the ground, is iffy, but almost everyone will be game enough to try it. If the same plank is straddling two buildings, a hundred feet off the ground, only those who chase the thrill of danger will venture voluntarily. In a way, the task is the same but the challenge is vastly different because the downside is dramatically different.

Dhoni's batting was marked by an ability to ignore the downside, under pressure or scrutiny. It is for this reason that it mattered little to him whether he was playing at the MECON Ground in Ranchi, in front of three dogs and a man, or in the final of a World Cup, in front of a capacity crowd at the Wankhede Stadium. It is for this reason that he has finished nine run chases with a six, something no other cricketer has done. Where you and I see needless risk, he looks into himself and trusts the process, to the exclusion of everything else.

Being such a great manager of risk strengthened Dhoni's legend in limited overs cricket, where he spent a lifetime reducing chases to a shoot-out between himself and the bowler, where he stripped the situation of all external factors till nothing was left but him with a bat in hand facing the ball that was coming at him. But his carefree manner, his ability to play the big shots, his apparent unflappability and the calm at the crease that comes from his Zen-like immersion in the simple task of playing the next ball are often misunderstood as an appetite for risk. In fact, the unwillingness to roll the dice made him one of the more defensive Test captains India has had. In the longer format, the path to the finish line is not clear till late into the game, and you have to do things hoping the chips will fall as you hope. Dhoni did not live on hope, and when he couldn't see a way of getting the job done, he simply shut shop and refused to lose the game.

Paddy Upton, who worked with the Indian team to create the right environment for mental well-being and success, has a theory about mental toughness and results. Upton, who does not go by the title sports psychologist, is nevertheless a keen student of the human mind and how it works, both academically and in practice. "When we study the best of the best, consider the following as a list of definitions associated with mental toughness: massive belief in self and one's ability; emotional control; clear thinking under pressure; ruthless pursuit of goals; operating well in chaos; not intimidated by others; unaffected by loss and failure; quick to spot weaknesses in opponents; inspirational, popular, influential; compulsive liar."

Wait, what? Yes, Upton slips that in, because he is listing the characteristics of psychopathy, rather than just mental

CLIVE MASON/GETTY IMAGES

**THE LONG WALK** Dhoni is run out in the India-New Zealand semi-final of the 2019 ICC Cricket World Cup in Manchester, England. It was MSD's last WC match

toughness. But, before you deem him a nutjob, there's more. "What if I told you that the academics who studied mental toughness among elite athletes might unknowingly have unearthed their psychopathic traits and prescribed these as characteristics of mental toughness? Barring only one or two, the traits are the same. This is the reason for so many psychopaths achieving such high levels of success in business, as well as in politics and sport."

Close your eyes and think of Dhoni, and you will see a tick against each of those boxes, save one—about being a compulsive liar. Then again, one way to ensure you do not lie is to say nothing at all. Upton explains this in terms more clearly understood by laymen. "The only difference between a corporate psychopath and Hannibal Lecter (*Silence of the Lambs*) & co., who torture animals as children and end up as jailed serial killers as adults, is their propensity for violence." Before you jump to conclusions, Upton was not, at any point, referring to Dhoni when he spoke of this, but it's hard not to be struck by how well the shoe fits. "I have worked with a few psychopaths. I've seen the so-called attributes of mental toughness in them, which help deliver results on the field. I have seen how fans, friends and the media adore these people. But I have also seen what it looks like when their mental toughness is unmasked as psychopathic behaviour," he says.

**THE POINT OF DHONI IS THAT HE DID NOT FIT HIMSELF INTO THE MOULD. RATHER, HE IMPOSED HIMSELF ON THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND HIM, TRANSPLANTED HIS THINKING INTO THE MINDS OF THOSE WHO SET THE AGENDA**

Before this sounds like a hatchet job on Dhoni, consider the legacy he has left, the system he has created:

➦ A youngster making his way into the Indian team today feels no pressure to conform to the image of an Indian cricketer the world constructed: look at Hardik Pandya, the way he plays, the way he carries himself, the way he lives his public life.

➦ A gifted youngster on his way to the top feels no need to be subservient to the big cogs in the wheel: look at Virat Kohli, the way he relates to coaches and selectors, cricket administrators and the media.

➦ A youngster aspiring to break the shackles of his history and geography does not wait to be invited to take a seat at the table: look at Jasprit Bumrah, the way he has kept his identity intact while going from obscurity to being the most feared Indian fast bowler going.

The legacy of Dhoni and more than that the *point* of Dhoni is that he did not come into Indian cricket and fit himself into the mould. Rather, he imposed himself on the environment around him, transplanted his thinking into the minds of those who set the agenda and left Indian cricket a better place than it was when he began.

When Tendulkar retired, the nation found itself in the grip of an emotional extravaganza. When Dhoni slid away, through a side door like the one he used to enter, many must stand in silent gratitude. If Tendulkar opened a door to let himself in, Dhoni left it ajar for the best of the rest to follow in his footsteps. ■

THE ROYAL TALE OF GAYATRI DEVI PG 61

ISHAAN KHATTER FINDING HIS FEET PG 64

# LEISURE

THE POSITIVE VIBES OF SOULMATE PG 62

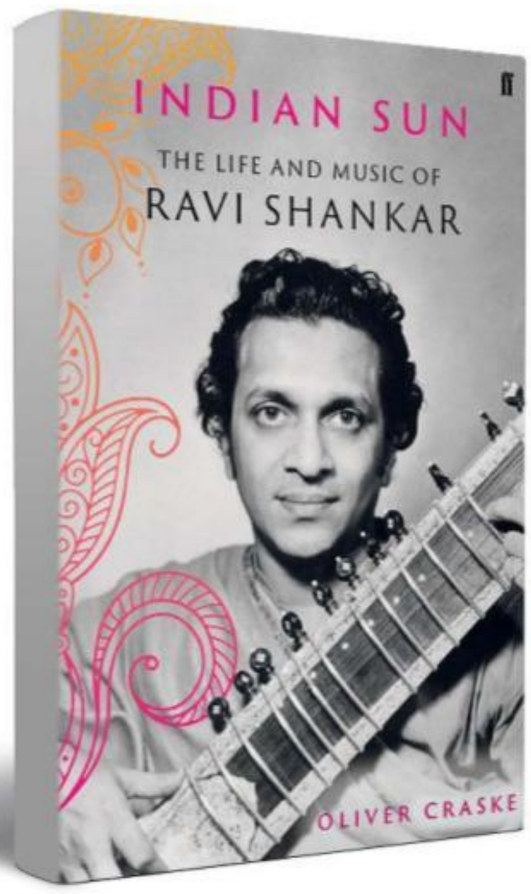
Q&A WITH DEV PATEL PG 68

BOOKS

## Behind the Music

A no-holds-barred account of Pandit Ravi Shankar's incredible career and tumultuous private life

DINODIA PHOTOS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO




**INDIAN SUN**
**The Life and Music of Ravi Shankar**
*By Oliver Craske*
FABER & FABER
**₹899; 672 pages**

This is a meticulously researched biography—detailed, judicious, engaging and illuminating. Not since Marie Seton's *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray* (1971), has anything comparable been attempted for a major contemporary Indian cultural figure. Oliver Craske has worked hard for many years and trawled the public records of Ravi Shankar, who died in 2012, across many continents and in India. His project had the unqualified support of Shankar's second wife Sukanya and his daughter Anoushka who opened the family archives and encouraged a no-holds-barred account. Shankar's trailblazing public career and his tumultuous private life fit into a pattern. As biographical accounts of Arturo Toscanini and Leonard Bernstein—comparable figures from Euro-American cultures—show, creative freedom and sexual drive often stood in for each other, generating the restless persona that was the modern artist.

Craske is particularly good on two counts—the connections between Shankar's public career and India's emergence as an independent nation are convincingly made. Shankar's American sojourns are also recounted in detail, for here the archival record is strong, thanks to the patronage networks, funding agencies, Hollywood contacts and mercurial patrons, New York elites, jazz musicians, impresarios, record producers. Yehudi Menuhin is a significant figure—a devoted admirer who fell in love with Hindustani music and also yoga.

Early in his career, Shankar resigned from a stable All India Radio job and took the risk of striking out in the US and set a precedent for generations of Indian artists. The initial forays were mixed, but he made life-long friends, cut his first L.P. and had an affair with the photographer Marilyn Silverstone (many other lovers followed). Craske unearths an interesting nugget—Shankar's initial trip was underwritten by the CIA, covertly influencing culture in the Cold War era, though the musician himself had no idea about the source of funds. The prestige of success in the US added to his fame in India.

Delhi, Calcutta and especially Bombay remained crucial for opportunities in India. The Indian People's Theatre Association in the 1940s and the film industry helped hone his talents as a composer of popular melodies and develop the potential of an Indian orchestra. In the 1950s, the cultural sphere expanded dramatically but took a conservative Hindu turn. In his Bengali autobiography, Shankar briefly mentioned the tussle with Muslim musicians. To Shankar's credit, he never plugged into this communitarian discourse, but being a Brahmin must have helped his career.

Shankar's break-up with his talented wife Annapurna and her withdrawal from public life have long been grist to rumour mills. Here, too, Craske is careful and judicious, though one episode in this tussle, verging on low comedy, was Shankar's attempt to prove Annapurna's infidelity! She, in turn, had the police raid his flat while he was abroad. His relationship with father-in-law and teacher Allauddin Khan, too, deteriorated. The failed marriage was used endlessly by rivals to showcase his bad faith, but there were other attempts to sully his reputation. The famous incident where Vilayat Khan 'defeated' Shankar in a joint concert is recounted with equanimity here and is certainly more convincing than the sensational one in a recent biography of Khan. Shankar's spectacular success meant other musicians, critics, even ex-students, bitterly resented his fame. The last such episode was a gratuitous remark by a friend, vocalist Pt Jasraj, on Shankar receiving the Bharat Ratna in 1999. Shankar publicly forgave him.

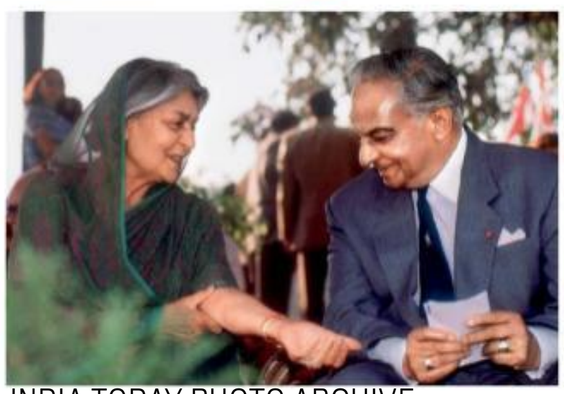
Craske is accessible and patient with explanations about Shankar's music, though details about his impact on pop and the avant garde scene in the US may tire Indian readers. The focus is overwhelmingly on ensemble and collaborative efforts—Shankar's stellar contribution to the sonic, aesthetic and stylistic system within Hindustani music could have been addressed in a more connected way.

Shankar and talented contemporary instrumentalists did certainly reverse the superior status of vocalism in Hindustani music—no mean achievement. His Maihar style also gave life to traditional *dhrupad* which had faded as a vocal genre. The sound of Shankar's sitar—especially the deep growl of the bass string—generated a new subjectivity and his superb compositional skills added a unique temporal dimension. According to music critic S. Kalidas, he had justly inherited a legendary status similar to Tansen's. ■

**–Partho Datta**

*The book makes strong connections between Ravi Shankar's career and the emergence of an independent India*

M ZHAZO



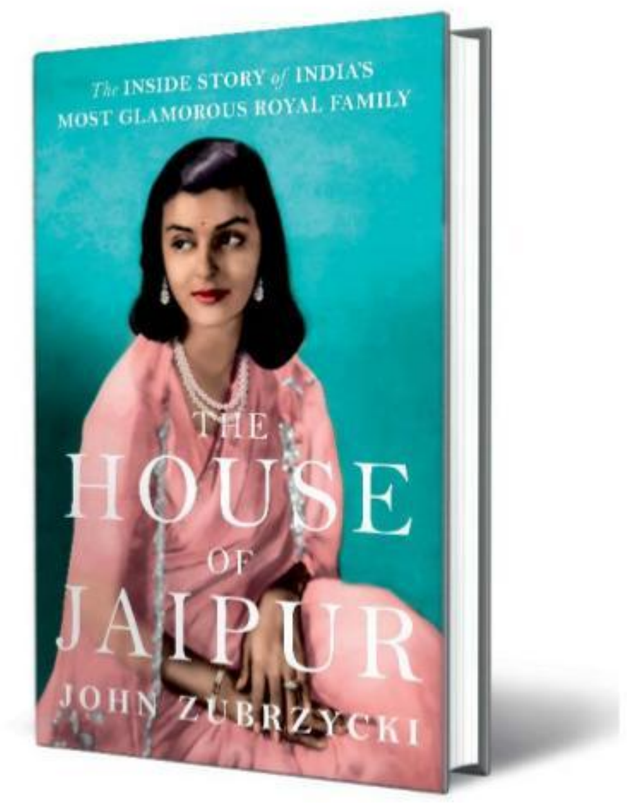
INDIA TODAY PHOTO ARCHIVE

**AN IMPERIAL ALBUM** Gayatri Devi and Man Singh II with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in Jaipur, 1961; Padmanabh Singh; and Gayatri Devi wihth stepson Bhawani Singh in 1998

BOOKS

# A ROYAL TALE

***John Zubrzycki's new book on Gayatri Devi and the royal household of Jaipur is a riveting saga of a troubled family***




**THE HOUSE OF JAIPUR**
**The Inside Story of India's Most Glamorous Royal Family**
*By John Zubrzycki*
JUGGERNAUT
**₹599; 384 pages**

When she died at the ripe old age of 90 in 2009, Gayatri Devi, the Rajmata of Jaipur, the city to which she had come as an awestruck bride 70 years earlier came to a standstill. Amid showers of rose petals, cries of "*Maharani ki jai*!", a 40-gun salute and the panoply of a state funeral, thousands of mourners thronged the Pink City. Newspapers around the world ran fulsome tributes. Neither Rajput-born nor fluent in Hindi, an audacious rule-breaker, why did she triumph in a kingdom that had barely changed since medieval times?

Hers is the image—as style-maker, royal jetsetter and most glamorous of MPs flung into jail by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency—that captures the precarious transition from India's princely Jazz Age to the upheavals of modern democracy. A hand-tinted portrait adorns the cover of John Zubrzycki's book, *The House of Jaipur*, but inside is a sobering 20th century saga more twisted than the secret passageways behind Hawa Mahal's lacy façade.

In her bestselling 1977 memoir *A Princess Remembers*, the Rajmata told a rose-tinted tale of the teenage passion that propelled her from Cooch Behar's royal household to Rambagh Palace as the third wife of the handsome polo-playing Maharaja of Jaipur. (Already a father of four, his two previous wives were sequestered in Rambagh's *purdah* wing.)

Together, Jai and Ayesha (as their friends knew them) turned Jaipur into a modernising project: appointing reformist administrators, starting girls' schools, negotiating political settlements and, presciently, converting their palaces into grand hotels. As party people, their social cachet was considerable. It irritated officialdom no end that the Queen and Prince Philip, the Mountbattens and Jackie Kennedy (and later Imran Khan and Mick Jagger) bore down on Jaipur for their company. In 1966, they were the only Indians invited to Truman Capote's iconic Black and White Ball. Ignoring the dress code, Ayesha arrived in a gold sari and blaze of emeralds.

Yet they remained anachronisms of their age. Asked how she dealt with her husband's senior wives and adulteries, the Rajmata said, "I think it's much easier to get on with your husband's other wife who has an official status than his mistress who is usurping you."

By removing layers of "airbrushed inconvenient truths" from her sanitised memoir, Zubrzycki's assiduously-researched, gripping account is of a troubled family wrecked by alcoholism, avarice and labyrinthine litigation among brothers and heirs. Ayesha's father and two adored brothers perished from drink. So did Jai's only daughter and his neglected *purdah* wives. Most tragically, their only biological son Jagat, divorced from his wife, a Thai princess, and estranged from his children, died in London after a reckless binge in 1997.

Claims of primogeniture by Jai's eldest son Bhawani Singh led to a landslide of lawsuits. Though the Rajmata anonymously left some of her best Cartier pieces to the British Museum, her grandchildren enforced their rights of inheritance to her property.

The fight in the courts failed to dim the razzmatazz of Jaipur's old court. Bhawani died in 2011, leaving a new rajmata in City Palace. His daughter Diya Kumari is now a BJP MP. And his grandson, 22-year-old Padmanabh Singh, is the new maharaja. He plays polo in England, waltzes Reese Witherspoon's daughter at debutante balls in Paris, and walks the runway for Dolce & Gabbana in Milan. Brand Jaipur, a creation of Ayesha and Jai's, marches on. ■

**–Sunil Sethi**

MUSIC

# Vibes positivity

The worst thing you can say about Soulmate's albums is that they are few and far between. In the 17 years of their existence, India's best-known–and arguably the best–blues act has put out just four records. The newest, *Give Love*, was unveiled on August 1, to coincide with International Blues Music Day.

There were several reasons for the six-year-long gap, says guitarist-composer Rudy Wallang whose searing solos are immaculately matched by singer-songwriter Tipriti 'Tips' Kharbangar's intense vocals in the Shillong-based duo's releases and performances. They needed the time to earn back the money they spent on making 2014's Ten Stories Up at Mumbai's Yash Raj Films Studios, tour extensively, and test and perfect fresh tunes on their road.

The new album, which was recorded at Wallang's home studio, The Hole in the Wall, combines the energy of their live sets with the gleam of polished production, he says. While *Give Love* fits seamlessly with the rest of Soulmate's discography–their LPs are impressively devoid of any fillers–it differs from its predecessors in a couple of ways. After a decade of enlisting some of the country's finest session musicians, for the first time, they laid down the songs with the same rhythm section that performs at the pair's gigs, Wallang's sons, bassist Leon and drummer Vincent.

It's also the first time the band has been explicitly political. The tracks 'Hole in Your Soul' and 'Troubled Times' address the avariciousness of bureaucrats and businessmen; the former was written about the inhumane practice of rat-hole mining in their home state of Meghalaya, which, say activists, has continued in spite of an official ban. Until now, Soulmate had consciously stayed away from talking about current affairs to avoid, as Wallang puts it, "becoming preachy". "But our so-called leaders are messing up big time and doing it blatantly, so how long can we keep quiet?" he adds.

Despite its title, *Give Love* is short on ballads such as 'The Price' and 'A Cup of Tea'–standout cuts that featured respectively on their 2004 debut *Shillong* and 2009 sophomore effort *Moving On*. The decision to amp things up was a considered choice. "We have reached a point where we understand the dynamics of our music," says Kharbangar. "People understand and connect with us more when we play raw, rockier tunes, [so for] this album [we said] let's forget writing songs that are too mellow."

For their legions of fans, the new album is, to borrow a line from closing track 'Your Love', "like the soothing rain on a steamy day". Wallang originally planned to call their fourth collection "*Soulmate Sings the Blues*" until his brother suggested they christen it after the sing-along lead single 'Give Love', the reap-what-you-sow message of which, they felt, could spread some positivity among all those grappling with the state of the world right now.

"People are very frustrated [because] they're not able to do what they want and there's nothing happening anywhere," says Kharbangar. "Everything builds up. You get anxiety, anger, depression. Most of the time on social media, people are just hating on each other. We named this album *Give Love* so that we can inspire people to love. When you love someone, it naturally comes back." ■

**–Amit Gurbaxani**

## EASTERN BLUES

*Veteran guitarist* ***Rudy Wallang*** *on why he vouches for these three acts, which have won the Mahindra Blues Band Hunt, organised as part of the annual Mahindra Blues Festival. Soulmate has played at the event a record six times and even has a stage named after them: the Soul Strat Saloon, which pays homage to them and blues-rock guitarist-composer Blackstratblues aka Warren Mendonsa*

***ARINJOY TRIO, Kolkata***
***2018***
*"Frontman Arinjoy [Sarkar] is a blues-man from the heart. That's one of the criteria I look for: a person who plays with feel, not just licks and phrases"*

**BACK WITH LOVE**
Rudy Wallang with sons Leon and Vincent, and Tipriti Kharbangar

**FOR THE FIRST TIME, SOULMATE HAS BEEN EXPLICITLY POLITICAL IN THEIR MUSIC**

***BLUE TEMPTATION, Shillong***
***2019***
*"Although they are not a hardcore blues group and are more blues-rock, they come from the blues and are a very solid band"*

***QUIET STORM, Jowai***
***2020***
*"This band from Meghalaya performs good, authentic blues. They touched a lot of people this year"*

CINEMA

# FINDING HIS FEET

**ISHAAN KHATTER** IS LEARNING TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN THE COMMERCIAL SIDE OF THE FILM INDUSTRY AND HIS INNER CALLING

Ishaan Khatter is not your typical Bollywood star-kid. Son of actress Neelima Azim and half-brother of Shahid Kapoor, Khatter had a rather unglamorous, muted debut with *Beyond the Clouds*, Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi's first Hindi feature. His next *Dhadak*, a Hindi remake of Marathi blockbuster *Sairat*, was a safer bet, but he would take another 18 months to figure out what he would do next. First of those projects is the Mira Nair-directed adaptation of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, all six episodes of which will screen at the Toronto International Film Festival. Khatter plays Maan, "a good-looking young wastrel forever", whose lyrical romance with an older courtesan Saeeda (Tabu) stirs plenty of controversy and conflict.

"He's an eternal wanderer," says Khatter of his character. "He almost feels like he is following his own set of rules which immediately made him very interesting to me. His choices don't adhere to convention and what people expect of him." Khatter is a bit of a nonconformist himself. The 24-year-old actor is learning to negotiate between the commercial diktats of the industry and his own inner calling. "There is pressure to conform to a certain image that people have liked of you and it is encouraged to not change that," says Khatter. "Ironically, being an actor is to explore various dimensions of yourself and to change yourself." *A Suitable Boy*, he knew, would give him that and showcase his talent to the world just like Nair's *The Namesake* had done for Irrfan Khan.

Khatter had heard of but not read the book when he auditioned for one of Seth's favourite characters in the book. Welsh writer Andrew Davies's 500-page-long script would be his first glimpse into the story of a newly independent India seen through the eyes of four families. While Khatter stayed away from the book so as to not "get caught up in things we wouldn't be showing", he still used it as "guidebook" while shooting in Lucknow. "Every other night I would open the chapter which would describe the scene [we were shooting the next day] and if I felt it was adding something of value, then I would use it," he says. "At the same time, I wanted to be open to what Tabu was doing and bringing something new; the interpretation is important to me."

**ISHAAN KHATTER** hopes Mira Nair's *A Suitable Boy* will do for him what her Namesake had done for Irrfan

It has made an impression on the press in the UK, where the series is playing on BBC One, with *The Sunday Times* magazine calling him a "Sunday-night star". Khatter isn't mulling much on if the series will translate into more opportunities abroad. For now, he's just glad to get out of his home and resume work, shooting his next Hindi feature, *Khaali Peeli*. ■

**–Suhani Singh**

COMEDY

# Time to Shine

The lockdown has helped humourist and actor **Danish Sait** be discovered by audiences beyond the south

Bengaluru-based radio jockey, humourist, actor and host Danish Sait has been at it for a decade but it took a lockdown for people beyond the South to recognise his funny bone. His short videos essaying a whole cast of characters he has created—Rammurthy Avare, Nagarajan the humble politician, Bevarsi Kudka (noble soul with a good heart), Asgar or Chacko Cheta, Didi Madam, Jaya, Razia—get instant likes on Twitter and Instagram. Some were already popular locally, courtesy Sait's eight-year stint as RJ and prank caller with Fever 104 FM, a gig he only recently quit. What's taken Sait by surprise is "the sudden acceptance of content from the south" in the western and northern belts. "I feel the format change from audio to video has helped," he says.

Capitalising on Sait's newfound fame, Amazon Prime Video released his second Kannada film, *French Biryani*, in June. His first, *Humble Politician Nograj* (2018), had won him a South Indian International Movie Award for best debut. Sait has reprised the character for an eight-episode series which is expected to release later this year on a streaming platform.

In September, Sait will head to the UAE for the Indian Premier League where he will sport a moustache to be the Royal Challengers Bangalore team's unwanted cheerleader, Mr. Nags. But, as Sait says, he's not doing anything different. "It is just about magnifying what I already had."

One reason that Sait's humour resonates with a wider audience is that he largely stays clear of controversy. "My mother always told us that religion and politics are personal...so keep your mouth shut," he says. While a host of stand-up comedians in Mumbai recently received death and rape threats for older videos and had to apologise, Sait's humour has proven to be safer. Before publishing his videos, he shares them with his "offence metres"—sister Kubbra Sait (of *Sacred Games* fame), and his girlfriend.

Instead of politics, Sait's interest lies in improv comedy. "I love that from nothing or one thing, you can build a story." Sait has also been a part of director-writer Saad Khan's popular show *The Improv*.

Sait's career is going well enough that he doesn't feel the need to follow his sister to Mumbai. "My calling was to do stories in whatever form or platform, never to be an actor in Hindi films," says Sait. "I don't understand this fixation with Bollywood, the airport look, the parties. Also I can't stand the weather in Mumbai. When I am at a party there I am just thinking that this person next to me must be sweating like me." Sait is content in Bengaluru. "For me, the priority is not the destination but the work," he says. ■

**—Suhani Singh**

**"I don't understand this fixation with Bollywood, the airport look, the parties"**

## A DOSE OF COMEDY

**Jose Covaco**
Covaco has a knack for finding humour in the average Mumbaikar's woes—be it finding an auto or the inflated electricity bills during lockdown—and the theatrics of India's loudest news anchor

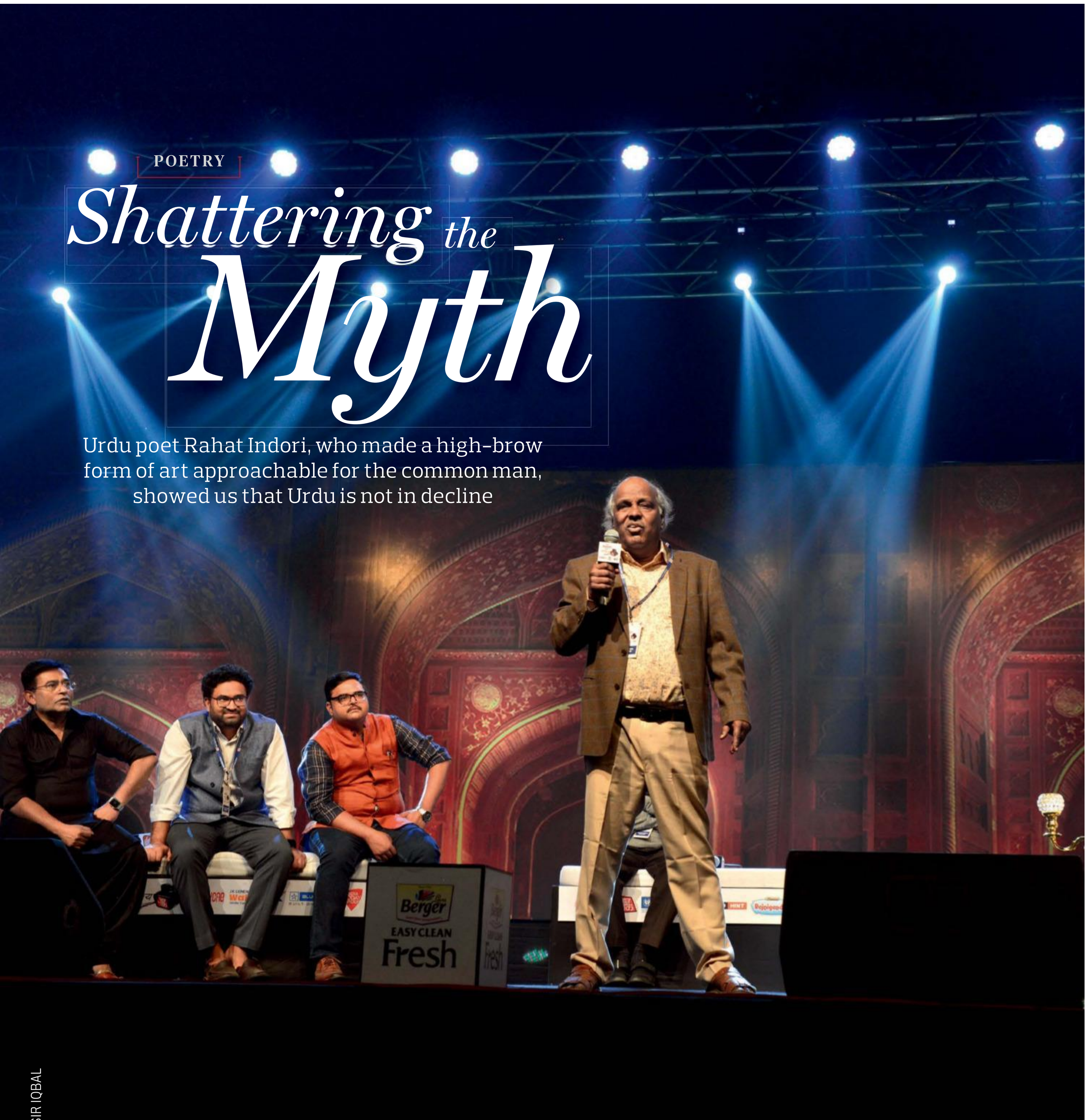
**Saloni Gaur**
From the socially conscious Nazma Aapi to the outspoken Kangana Runout, in which Gaur does a pitch-perfect rendition of the actress, Gaur provides commentary on the absurdities of news, politics and Bollywood

**Sarah Cooper**
The Brooklyn-based comedian's exaggerated lip syncs to some of President Donald Trump's bizarre statements and theories have earned her two million followers on Twitter. Luckily for Cooper, she's never short on material.

POETRY

# *Shattering the Myth*

Urdu poet Rahat Indori, who made a high-brow form of art approachable for the common man, showed us that Urdu is not in decline

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POETRY

# A Sound and Light Show

**Rahat Indori's lyrical ability—and glimpses of depth—show through in his written work. But his popularity springs from histrionics. Search his name on YouTube, sort the results by view count.**

The top hit (22 million views) is his 2012 Dakhani-style rendition in Dubai of '***Bulaati hai magar jaane ka nai***'. Some poets comment in between their recitation; Rahat interspersed lyrics in his commentary. He is a poet of 2010, he says, not the '60s-'70s. What does that mean? It means he will not go home empty-handed; he will snatch the stars and take them along.

**WELL-VERSED**
Rahat Indori performs at the *mushaira* session at Sahitya Aaj Tak 2019

The phenomenon of Rahat Indori appears to be interminable. Who would have expected the 70-year-old Urdu poet from Indore, who died on August 11 after testing positive for the coronavirus the night before, to dominate the media space as comprehensively as he has since his passing?

This, however, is not an appraisal of the virus. It is about the unprecedented mass appeal of a poet the cognoscenti had no measure of. The revelation was thrilling, lifting the spirits of Urdu enthusiasts.

It says something of the critics, scholars and the dwindling tribe of those reared in the sophisticated milieu of Urdu. They were so out of touch with the burgeoning audiences lining up for a Rahat recitation that they gasped when they saw the crowds.

Urdu had earlier administered a similar shock. Sanjiv Saraf, a cultural entrepreneur and something of a visionary, had spotted a powerful Urdu undercurrent, a yearning the literati had not discerned. In 2015 when Saraf launched Jashn-e-Rekhta, a three-day carnival of Urdu in all its forms, no one could have imagined the mini Urdu revolution it would unleash. Last year, the event, spread over six venues within the National Stadium in Delhi, registered a daily footfall of 300,000. This, too, astonished the weakened Urdu establishment. Consequently, Urdu, unshackled by traditionalism, soared. This new energy is the function of a new audience riding a wave of egalitarianism. It is axiomatic then that this kind of change, which equalises hierarchies, would bring about corresponding amendments in taste.

As a performer at *mushairas*, Rahat Indori was able to charge fees other poets couldn't even dream of

The ease with which people relate to Urdu has been evident in the Hindi film industry. Lyrics and dialogues had to be more direct to be easily communicable. Little wonder then that Rahat was a favourite among popular music directors such as Anu Malik and A.R. Rahman.

The beeline that Urdu poets made for Bollywood was unintentionally facilitated by P.C. Joshi, the first secretary-general of the Communist Party of India. Under the umbrella of the Progressive Writers' Association, Joshi attracted the finest talents in Urdu poetry to Mumbai to increase the party's cultural outreach. To supplement their meagre stipends from the party, poets such as Majrooh Sultanpuri, Sahir Ludhianvi, Ali Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi began to write song lyrics, doing the groundwork for the likes of Rahat to enter the scene later.

Son of a poor cloth mill worker, Rahat, through sheer hard work, educated himself, doing his PhD on a theme which later stood him in good stead—Urdu *mushaira*. And what a *mushaira* performer he was—theatrical, if not exactly mesmeric, demanding fees that none of the poets listed above would have ever even dreamt of.

Artist M.F. Husain, for whom Rahat was "just the greatest", had even designed a cover of one of Rahat's collections. Though, that is not to say that Rahat was, in fact, actually the best. Husain was one of the greatest modern Indian painters, but that may also be why his taste in poetry was limited. Rahat's poetry was exceptionally popular, but that itself may be the reason why it would not be considered what English poet Matthew Arnold called "high seriousness". ■

**–Saeed Naqvi**

The second (21 million views) is **his 2017 appearance on *The Kapil Sharma Show*.** He leaves the redoubtable Navjot Singh Sidhu speechless. His couplets are maudlin. The host Sharma eggs him on to provide "something romantic" for the young people in the audience. Rahat responds with advice in a couplet: when you shake a hand, press it too (yes, like that!).

While some poets comment in between their recitation, **RAHAT INDORI** interspersed lyrics in his commentary

Keep scrolling and you will see several examples of how Rahat dragged **Urdu shayari** out of nostalgia and into the world wide web. The histrionics, the commentary that draws in the uninitiated...along with his poetic ability meant Rahat could stoop to conquer an age that condemns self-doubt and celebrates brash confidence.

**–Sopan Joshi**

# The Local Factor

British actor **Dev Patel** on how India has inspired him and his directorial debut

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE

**Q. You recently narrated the National Geographic series *India from Above* on Disney+ Hotstar. What impression of India did it leave you with?**

What constantly struck me was the ingenuity of Indians no matter how intense the conditions are, whether you are a salt farmer in the Rann of Kutch or building an entire ecosystem on the Loktak Lake [Manipur]. The concept of adaptability is why India has excelled so quickly. It makes you proud and inspired, and that's the core of the show.

**Q. Any places you want to visit after it?**

I need to do a couple more movies to afford all the air travel to the places I want to see around India.

**Q. How is your directorial debut, set in Mumbai, coming along?**

Mumbai is like this incredible land of juxtapositions, the beautiful South where there's so much history with modernity right next to it. I have spent six years working on the script. It's a story I have wanted to tell and it happens to be set in India because I am so inspired by the country. I was there early this year doing casting sessions. I am in awe of the actors and their dexterity as performers.

**Q. You are being offered parts not dependent on your ethnicity. Do you feel that's a step towards inclusion and diversity in the industry?**

Completely. It's because of bold filmmakers willing to put up with the ire of a certain section as they want to create art with me. I credit Armando Iannucci and David Lowery for opening doors for these other actors to come in.

**–with Suhani Singh**

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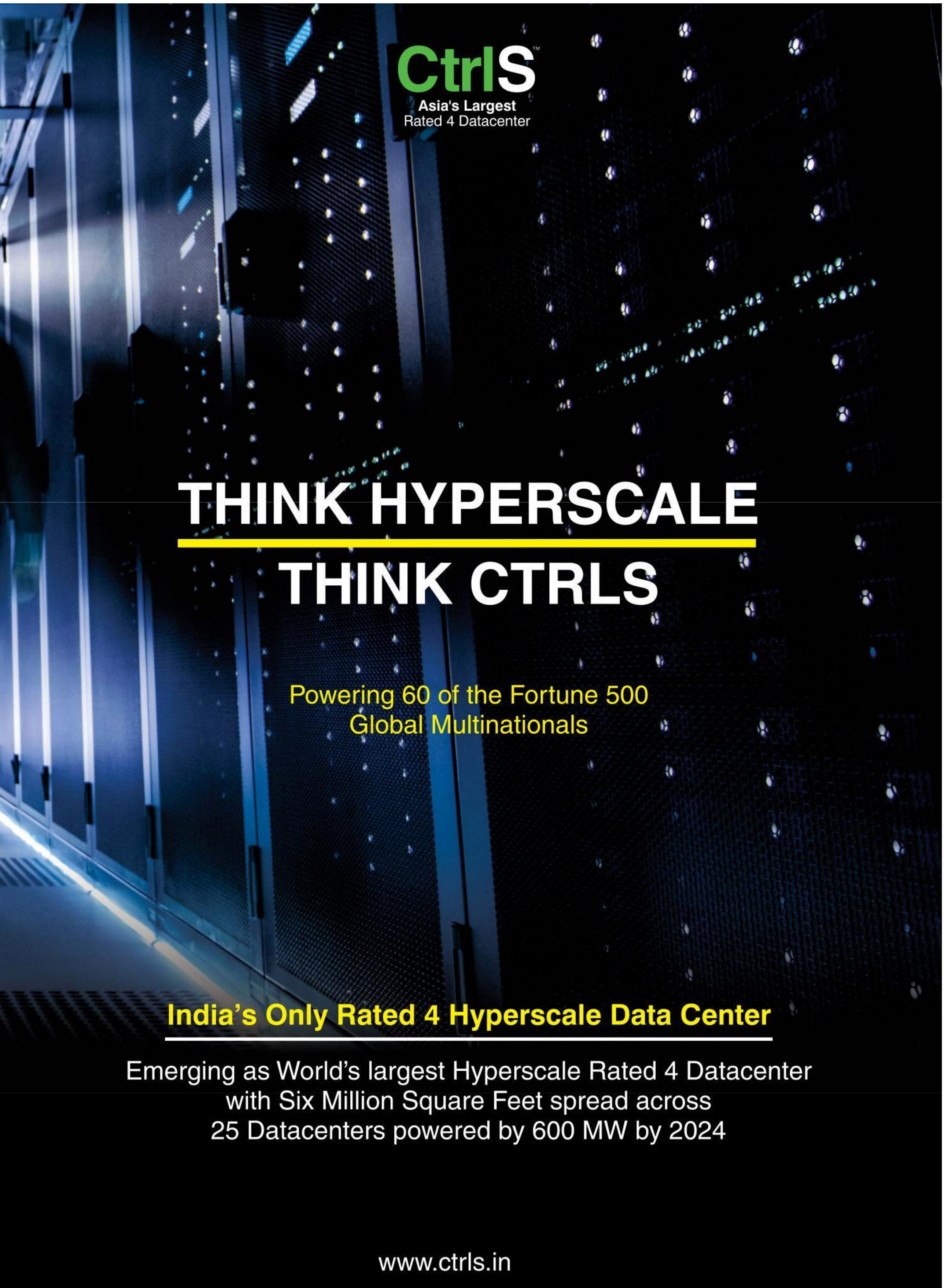
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